

A Cross-cultural Study of Modern Haikus: Chen Li's *Microcosmos*

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Abstract

The Taiwanese poet Chen Li (陳黎) has long been interested in Japanese haikus, as reflected in his 1993 publication *Microcosmos: One Hundred Modern Haikus* (小宇宙：現代俳句一百首). This collection of modern haiku was influenced not only by Japanese haiku but also by two Mexican poets, José Juan Tablada and Octavio Paz. Through Chen Li's international perspective and response to Latin American poetry, we are presented with a wealth of cross-cultural haikus in his *Microcosmos*.

It is worth noting that both Mexico and Taiwan have a history as colonies. Examining the modern haiku poetry produced by these authors helps us to see how bicultural awareness in both Taiwan and Mexico can be an important foundation for reading and writing. Japanese haikus are literary forms of “the other” in the literature of these two areas. This intersects with literary translation, a type of deep reading. These poets, as translators, have deepened their own writing and expression. This article will focus on the cultural exchanges employed by Chen Li, José Juan Tablada, and Octavio Paz in translating and rewriting haikus. There is a complex loop embedded in such a reciprocal relationship that needs to be unlocked through cross-cultural/lingual translation. We will therefore examine how haikus, originally a highly restricted poetic form, have become a source of creativity and what literary changes this has produced.

Keywords: Chen Li, *Microcosmos*, modern haiku, José Juan Tablada, Octavio Paz

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I. Creative Writing and *Microcosmos*

As Tong King Lee's study¹ shows, Chen Li's² *Microcosmos* has spread via the internet in many forms, including dance and translation. Chen Li's "voice games" often give new meanings to classical poems. In addition to the short and easy-to-read modern haikus in *Microcosmos*, this is also an important part of the rich cross-cultural imagery of his work.³ Interestingly, Chen Li published *Microcosmos: Two Hundred Modern Haikus* in 2006.⁴ This poetry collection includes the 100 haikus in *Microcosmos: One Hundred Modern Haikus*,⁵ and the 100 rewritten haikus are based on the previous 100 haikus. The poetry can be considered as a complete unit, but these two groups of 100 haikus contrast and compete against each other (Chen 2006: 214).

To Chen Li, this is like "poetry's family journey" (詩的家庭旅行): All poets are family, my existence is just "an existing existence," just as "our poems are continuous and repeated." It is not "repetition" that he is trying to justify, however, but an honest reflection on the circular nature of literary life. As Chen Li states: "My predecessors' poems are covered by mine; in turn, mine will be covered by others'; my poems which replicate their outlook on life are chanted by travelers of many generations, and vice versa"⁶ (Chen 2006: 217). How to keep this literary spirit alive is his main concern and the genuine purpose of his translingual practice.

In "Text of the Moment: A Cultural Interpretation of 'Haiku-like-poems' in Taiwan," Ya-Hui Yang uses *Microcosmos* as an example to show how the writing of modern haiku in Taiwan, on the one hand, takes Japanese haiku as a model, and on the other, also integrates European, American, and Latin American haikus. There is no doubt that Chen Li drew inspiration from

¹ See Tong King Lee, "Toward a material poetics in Chinese: Text, translation, and technology in the works of Chen Li." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 26, no. 1 (2014): 71–104.

² As Michelle Yeh described, Chen Li (1954–) is known as "one of the most innovative and surprising poets in the Chinese poetry world today" (qtd. in *Chen Li Poems*). He has won many awards, including the National Arts Award. Chen Li has written fifteen books of poetry, and his representative works include the anthology *Intimate Letters*. His poetic style varies from profound lyricism to social satire. He is also the first translator of Latin American poetry in Taiwan. He has translated poetry from various different origins, covering Europe, Asia, Africa, and America, but he has most often translated Latin American modern poetry and Japanese haiku. In 2014, he was invited to participate in the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa in the United States.

³ Cross-cultural imagery refers to characteristics of Chen Li's poetry that have been previously discussed, such as "reading grafting," "artistic discovery," or "latent text." In addition to describing these as intertextuality with classical or foreign literature, we can also consider them a form of cultural translation of foreign experiences. In my article "The 'Latinamerica' in Li Chen's Poetry: An Investigation into the Cross-Cultural and Intertextual Translation," I analyzed this aspect. However, *Microcosmos* evidently has a more complex background, requiring a more detailed discussion.

⁴ In the following, quotations from the poems will primarily use the "200 Poems" version. If a comparison between the two books of *Microcosmos* is needed, each will be labeled as "*Microcosmos I*" or "*Microcosmos II*," respectively.

⁵ Chen Li translated some works by haiku masters, such as Bashō, Issa, Chiyo-ni, Ono no Komachi, etc., and used them as teaching material when he was a young teacher. These translation experiences inspired him to write poetry in a similar poetic style and about daily life. These poems are collected in *Microcosmos*. See the article "From my translation of *Anthology of Ancient and Modern Japanese Tanka*, I will discuss my journey of translating Japanese tanka and haiku" by Chen Li. See: <http://faculty.ndhu.edu.tw/~chenli/HT.htm#ONT>.

⁶ It's the concept of "poetry's family journey." The original text is as follows: 「我的詩覆蓋前已有之詩，且被後來之詩覆蓋；我的詩複製被不同世代旅人詠歎的生之況味，且被不同世代旅人複製。」

Japanese haiku; he translated outstanding haiku by poets such as Matsuo Bashō and Kobayashi Issa, which subsequently inspired him to create his own haikus. What is more interesting, however, is his engagement with Latin American haiku. As a matter of fact, he has translated as many as eight collections of Latin American poems.⁷ As for haiku poetry, he first noticed the Mexican poet José Juan Tablada and translated his six haikus in *Selected Modern Poems of Latin America*. Later, Chen Li translated two of Tablada's haiku collections, *Un Día* and *El Jarro de Flores*, as well as his graphic poetry collection, *Li-Po y Otros Poemas*, finally compiling all three into *The Love Song of Small Things: A Collection of Tablada's Haiku and Image Poems*. It can be said that Chen Li, who is fascinated by Japanese tanka and haiku,⁸ also has a passion for Latin American cultures. This article will focus on Chen Li's poetry theory, "poetry's family journey" in *Microcosmos*.

II. From Classic Japanese Haiku to Latin American Haiku

Before looking into Chen Li's cross-cultural haikus, we need to understand the structure of classic Japanese haikus.

(1) Features of haiku

Haiku is a Japanese poetic form that is one of the shortest in the world. A traditional Japanese haiku consists of three lines, composed of 17 syllables in a 5-7-5 pattern; it always includes a kireji, or "a cutting word," and a kigo, a "seasonal reference." As the form is modernized, these restrictions have become more relaxed, with more emphasis on the poem's brevity and the arrangement of the written form, particularly its striking blank spaces. This is the nature of haiku. Because of the limitations and characteristics of haiku, it is very difficult to accurately translate it into Chinese. According to Zheng Qingmao, a scholar of Classical Japanese, if written in Chinese characters, the 17 syllables can be written with 17 Chinese characters. Zheng believes, "It's fine if we apply this when writing Chinese Haikus, but if this is applied to a translated Chinese Haiku, it'd be rather too long" (Matsuo 2011: iv-xvi). On the other hand, eleven characters in a 3-5-3 pattern may appear too short. Zheng therefore believes that "Fourteen syllables in a 4-6-4 pattern seems adequate" (Matsuo 2011: iv-xvi). In Chen Li's opinion, however, seventeen syllables in a 5-7-5 format written in three lines works well. Chen, however, also believes that seventeen Chinese

⁷ He once published a collection, *Selected Modern Poems of Latin America*, which contains 200 poems by 29 poets from more than eight Latin American countries, the poets including Gabriela Mistral, Pablo Neruda and Octavio Paz. The Chilean poet Neruda is obviously his favorite, and there are at least six collections of his translated poems.

⁸ Taiwan was once under Japanese colonial rule, but there were no Taiwanese joining in haiku creation until the Taishō era (大正時期). At that time, Japanese haiku usually would describe the flowers and birds in nature, but Taiwanese haiku were more concerned with people and things. When World War II began, so-called war haiku were often recited. Huang Ling-zhi began to recite Japanese haiku after the war and established the Taipei Haiku Association to follow the rules of traditional haiku. Related discussions can be found in Jau-Shin Wu's article "History of Taiwanese Haiku." See: <http://www.olddoc.net/hanyuhaiku/hist-of-haiku-in-tw-chin-1.htm>.

characters arranged in a 5-7-5 pattern is too rigid (Chen 2000: 132). Thus, there are only a few such in Chen Li's haikus. Here's one of them from *Microcosmos*:

啊! 波特萊爾 5 何其寬廣舒適的 7 感覺的沙發 5 (「小宇宙 I-79」)	Oh, Baudelaire, how broad and comfortable a sofa of senses! (<i>Microcosmos</i> I-79)
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Compared to haikus in Chinese, Latin American haikus written in Spanish are easier to compose since Spanish, like Japanese, is a polysyllabic language, making it easier to follow the 5-7-5 pattern of the traditional Japanese form. Here is an example by Mario Benedetti, an Uruguayan poet who wrote a collection of haiku using the traditional haiku form:

Original	Syllabified	English translation
los que caminan	<u>los</u> <u>que</u> <u>ca</u> <u>mi</u> <u>nan</u> 5-a	People walking
sobre río de vino	<u>so</u> <u>bre</u> <u>rí</u> <u>o</u> <u>de</u> <u>vi</u> <u>no</u> 7-b	on the river of wine
a veces flotan ⁹	<u>a</u> <u>ve</u> <u>ces</u> <u>flo</u> <u>tan</u> 5-a	occasionally float

This Spanish haiku closely imitates the classic haiku form: seventeen syllables in a 5-7-5 pattern, with even-line rhyme, and a seasonal reference to Autumn (here refer to grape harvest season). As far as its content is concerned, it describes the festival scenes in South American countries with a humorous undertone. It is thus a perfect match between form and content.

(2) Latin American haiku

Spanish haikus are an innovation that had not been mainstream in Latin American poetry until recently. With the rise of the modernism movement during the late 19th century to the early 20th century, however, haikus began to appear in Latin American literature. By the 1980s, there were enough translations of Japanese haikus to encourage poets to experiment with writing their own. Lin Sheng-Bin's study found that poets adopted the form because they were disillusioned with the current political and societal situation in their own countries, and "worries drive people to overlook the reality and to look to exotic and utopian environments to place themselves in. Orientalism becomes a more specific component to the exotic tone in modernism" (Lin 1992: 8-9). Two poets, José Juan Tablada and Octavio Paz, represent two separate eras of Spanish language haiku poetry. Chen Li has translated much of Mexican poet Tablada's work. Octavio Paz, in his turn, looked up to Tablada as his predecessor. Paz, the Mexican poet who won the Nobel Prize in 1990, praised

⁹ This poem is from *Rincón de Haikus* (Benedetti 1999).

Tablada's work for its eternally youthful undertone, noting that Tablada has "many imitators and his style is a school that has achieved a new form" (Paz 1994: 153).

Tablada created a new path for modernism through Japanese culture. This allowed him to be creative, yet faithful to himself. His experiments with Japanese haikus "gave him an escape from his misery and helped him find hope" (Lin 1992: 149). Though Tablada was influenced by Japanese culture, his haiku poetry adopts the form, but not the spirit, of Japanese haiku. Here is an example of his creativity:

Original	English translation
Meditación, 5-a del pensamiento 7-b (del = de el) habitación. 5-a	Meditation: thoughts room.

He uses the least number of words necessary by putting 4 words in a 5-7-5 pattern and even-line rhyme. The focus here is not on the conversation with nature, or the animals he loves, but his own thoughts. One of the aspects which draws Latin American poets to haikus is their lack of verbs. Many classic haikus are composed only of nouns and adjectives, painting a mental picture. Tablada was a painter as well. He made drawings for his haikus and even created visual haikus. Meditation is a way to guide our thoughts. Here, he is using a room to represent a thought and to visualize meditation. This visualization has everything to do with the structure of the Spanish word. The prefix "medi-" is associated with the verb "medir." "Medir" is a measurement of space and also means to consider or ponder. The repetition of "i-tación" not only provides a rhyme but creates a visual image. Hence, it both echoes Zen and the poet playing with Spanish words. Tablada's consistency and creativity have not only contributed to Mexican literature but also to the interest in haiku in Latin America. Chen Li has also been influenced by Tablada and adores his work. Tablada was one of the first to focus on writing haikus outside of Japanese and to publish a work devoted to haiku.

Tablada's adoption of the haiku form was not a simple process. Joyce Chi-Hui Liu uses semiotic syncretism to explain the symbolization process of continuous cultural activities. She writes, "Writing at all levels is a fragmented and subjective impression and it also involves a complex translation and multiple exchanges of the coding of symbols" (Liu 2019: 232). Seen in this way, Tablada's haiku writing is not a simple cultural exchange, but has gone through a complicated and highly hybrid process as argued above. It is the same with Chen Li's *Microcosmos*.

III. Cultural Translation and the Emergence of Chen Li's Haikus

As Chen Li observed in his article "The Fun of Haikus," the Western literary world also drew inspiration from the haiku form. The 1910s imagist movement is a good example. Three representative modernist figures, Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound from the United States, and

Tablada from Mexico, all drew deep inspiration from haiku. Chen Li translates Tablada's "Sandía" ("Watermelon") into Chinese 「夏日，豔紅冰涼的／笑聲：／一片／西瓜」¹⁰ and compares it with Pound's renowned poem "In a Station of the Metro": "The apparition of these faces in the crowd: / Petals on a wet, black bough" (Chen 2007: 196). In *Microcosmos*, Chen Li then adds his own dialogic haiku:

冰棒般，自夢的嘴角
溶化開來的
夏夜的微笑 (「小宇宙 I-20」)

Dissolving from the dreamlike corners of the mouth,
Like a melting popsicle,
the smile of a summer night. (*Microcosmos* I-20)

What is different from the Zen in Matsuo Bashō's work is the nativization of the non-Japanese poets. In other words, both watermelons and popsicles belong to the summer and can trigger laughter. Put simply, Chen Li is using a popsicle and summer night smiles to recreate Tablada's watermelon and summer laughter.

Tablada and Chen Li are both authors and translators of haikus. Translation is never easy. Tablada uses a-b-b-a as a rhyme scheme, and it seems to have no equivalent in Chinese. The untranslatability is controversial. How Chen Li overcomes this and turns his translations into new creations is worth looking into.

(1) The role of Chen Li's translation

Traditionally, good translation needs to meet three criteria: faithfulness, elegance, and expressiveness. This has been called into question. As Benjamin puts it: "translation finds itself not in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one" (Benjamin 1996: 258-259). As Benjamin suggests, translation is about how to use the target language, not the source language, to search for equivalents in their own contexts. Culture has a significant role to play in this process.

Tablada translated Japanese haikus in order to revive the fading modernist movement.¹¹ Chen Li writes haikus to respond to his time: "To revitalize 'Human Realm' (the literary supplement of

¹⁰ Tablada's poem is as follows: ¡Del verano, roja y fría / carcajada, / rebanada / de sandía! (Underline added by the author referring to rhymes a-b-b-a.)

¹¹ 'Modernismo' (modernism) is a literary movement that originated in the late 19th century based on late romanticism. 'Modernism' as advocated in the United States and Europe debuted about twenty years later. It was a movement of painting and architecture in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century and was called avant-garde (vanguardismo) in Latin America. Here we refer to Latin American modernism.

China Times newspaper) the poet Yang Ze asked me to create modern haikus. I think it is a good idea.” Chen Li’s choice of haikus can be seen in retrospect as a new poetic language revolution. The loop of translating old poems and creating new haikus is accepted and transformed by the symbolization process in the continuous cultural activities. Chen Li’s haikus combine classic Japanese components and Latin American components: “Let Basho write his haikus, walk on his path/ *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (Oku no Hosomichi)/ I choose Bashō to write and walk in your path” (*Microcosmos* II-60). This is Chen Li’s tribute to Matsuo Bashō, Saint of Haiku, and his declaration of his intent to write his own haikus.

In 1957, Paz and Eikichi Hayashiya translated Matsuo Bashō’s *Sendas de Oku* into Spanish. The book introduces Japanese haikus and the life of Matsuo Bashō. Paz shows his respect for classical haikus in his poem “ASHO-AN” by observing the strict form of the haiku. After translating Paz’s tribute to Bashō into Chinese, Chen Li added four haikus as a response.

Paz’s haiku	Chen Li’s translation	Chen Li’s haikus as a response
“BASHO-AN”	〈芭蕉庵〉	from <i>Microcosmos</i>
El mundo cabe en diecisiete sílabas: tú en esta choza.	整個世界嵌 入十七個音節中： 你在此草庵。	With two books as a pillow, I lie on the sultry night floor. Bending my legs, rocking my knees, seeking verses, I am the first haiku of summer. (<i>Microcosmos</i> II-16)
Troncos y paja: por las rendijas entran Budas e insectos.	樹幹與稻草： 穿過這些縫隙，進 來佛與蟲子。	One or two monks fond of dancing, Move between two mountain temples, dancing by the stream. Clothes in twos seem nonexistent. (<i>Microcosmos</i> II-42)
Hecho de aire entre pinos y rocas brota el poema.	以清風做成， 在松樹林與岩石 之間，詩湧出。	Pulling over to the roadside, I lay down to see the blue sky beyond The nose. A small bug stopped on my nose tip as if on a peak. At that moment, my body was a mountain range of my hometown.
Entretejidas ocales, consonantes: asa del mundo.	母音與子音， 子音與母音的交 織：世界之屋。	
Huesos de siglos, penas ya peñas, montes: aquí no pesan.	數百年之骨， 愁苦化成岩石，山：	
Esto que digo son apenas tres líneas: choza de sílabas. ¹²	此際輕飄飄。 我說出的這	

¹² See: <https://terebess.hu/english/haiku/paz.html>

	些，勉強湊成三行： 音節的草庵。(Chen Li and Chang Fen-ling 79) ¹³	<i>(Microcosmos II-57)</i> I lie down Become a mountain and the embodiment of the clouded sky it's about to rain. <i>(Microcosmos I-80)</i>
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Chen Li diverges here from the classical haiku form in two ways. In spite of the fact that he opts for a seventeen-syllable form with a 5-7-5 pattern, his haiku is more than three lines. Second, he uses linked haikus in *Microcosmos*. To understand how these originals have been transformed in the process of translation, we need to scrutinize the differences among the poems.

Paz uses “el mundo” (the world) and “choza” (hut) to express Bashō’s haiku with brevity and simplicity but containing a dense meaning, like a universe. Expanding beyond “the world” and “hut,” he also introduces contrasting elements such as “troncos y paja” (logs and straw) and “Budae insectos” (Buddhas and bugs), demonstrating his profound understanding of oriental philosophy. A closer examination of the verses in “BASHO-AN” offers insight into Paz’s adept handling of the oriental dualistic contradictions. Paz embeds Zen through the description of nature, that is to say, even though past events were heavy, we have to see them as being as light as smoke and wind. How deep is the realization from Paz to Bashō! Undoubtedly, the meaning of “BASHO-AN” deeply touched Chen Li, inspiring him to write his own haiku after he had finished translating.

Chen Li’s image of becoming a mountain is inspired by Paz’s philosophy of Zen. He notices that man is an integral part of nature. In traditional Chinese philosophy, the “combination of human and heaven” or “harmony between nature and man” is a very important concept. Thus, we can say that Chen Li’s haiku goes back to the philosophy of the Three Teachings: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.

Here we see not only the loop of translation and creation but also the poet’s inner or local experiences through “the other.” The image of I-as-mountain is expanded into a haiku (II-80). The punctuation used in this haiku visualizes the movement implicit in “I lie down / Become a mountain and the embodiment of the clouded sky / it’s about to rain.” We can see this through intertext. Paz’s mountain is floating (“... montes: aquí no pesan”), but Chen Li’s mountain is I.

This change encompasses shifts through time, space, languages, and culture. This is the start of a cross-cultural continuum: Because of Bashō, Japanese haikus are moved a notch up—from simple folk literature to philosophical literature—and have great influence on world literature. Because of Bashō, Paz begins introducing haikus and writing haikus to help connect Latin American cultures and East Asian cultures. Because of Bashō, then Paz, then Chen Li, the three-

¹³ This paper refers to Chen Li as the translator and often seems to ignore another translator, Chang Fen-ling. In fact, Chen Li plays a leading role in all translations. For details, please see note 3 on p. 85 of my article “The ‘Latinamerica’ in Li Chen’s Poetry: An Investigation into the Cross-Cultural and Intertextual Translation” where I further analyze this aspect.

line haikus have traveled from Mount Qilai in Hualien, over the Pacific Ocean to the volcanoes of Mexico, then back to the Ōu Mountains in Japan.

(2) Chen Li's translated world

The haiku form may indeed be seen as restrictions on writing, and appears quite the opposite of the freedom poets desire, but poets purposefully look for variations and condensed language appropriate for their self-expression. To meet this need, they must try various ways to create new possibilities. In this way, restriction can offer greater freedom and meanings can become limitless. The variations of poetry are like a type of translation. In Chen Li's translation aesthetic, as he writes in *Microcosmos*, we find that: "Hidden in you/inside, like water into water, is/ seen by the world, but not a person sees (*Microcosmos* II-8). Undoubtedly, we can take Paz's word for it: Writing poetry is a way to translate the world and to identify with the microcosmos created by the haikus.

Chen Li's article "Traveling between Languages" translates Masaoka Shiki's poem: "He washes his horse, with the setting sun on the autumn sea." Later, this becomes "He washes his remote control / with the moonbeams infiltrating / between two buildings" (*Microcosmos* I-1). Thus, Chen rewrites Shiki's work to offer a vision of our time. Indeed, Chen Li thinks it is proper to substitute a horse brush with a remote control to highlight the sense of isolation and neatness in Shiki's poem. I feel that it is quite revealing to include modern technology. Chen Li also admits: "I use the 'remote control' to translate and update the elegantly lonely life scene of Shiki" (Chen 2014: 243). Chen Li stands on his own ground to translate the world with an international perspective. He asks: "Is writing some kind of translation, traveling between languages? Or do all writers create the same work, the pure white space and the empty fullness overwritten again and again?" (Chen 2014: 245). The answer, which responds to Paz, is found in *Microcosmos*.

If the local environment shapes our thoughts, perceptions, language use, and interpretation, further interpretation of haikus within the framework of cultural practices can be considered. When engaging in translation activities, translators are constrained by the underlying history, language, and culture in their consciousness. These mental frameworks continuously define the scope of meaning. Chen Li's haiku poetry, "a prison of three lines, giving birth only at the ultimate extremity" (*Microcosmos* II: 214-215), shows that he is a "silent prisoner: we shatter / transparent walls with words, yet are forced / to clamp down every piece of shattered silence with each breath" (*Microcosmos* I-46). This can be understood by borrowing Wai-lim Yip's assertion that "language and thought are both prisons, constantly forming and breaking rules within a 'closed' system of thinking and linguistic norms" (Yip 2002: 53). Progressing from poetry to language to thought, Chen Li further realizes, "Ah man (人), come and have / a photo of existence taken: / prisoner (囚)" (*Microcosmos* II-58).¹⁴

¹⁴ Author's Note: The Chinese character "prisoner" (囚) looks like a man (人) confined to a frame.

On the other hand, as Yip observes, in the dialogue of translation, “it also allows thought and language to complete as an ‘open’ system. In the encounter and conversation of different histories and times, it continues to grow, constantly changing.” Through this translation of reality at the turn of a new century, the meaning of imprisonment sprouts new branches: “Prison: / Each person sleeps on their own tatami mat / Each person eats from their own coffin board” (*Microcosmos* II-67); “Prison: Have you seen me, stripped bare, / in the video conversation with you? / Peeping Toms in distant time and space / are accomplices in cybersex through words” (*Microcosmos* II-68). Therefore, it can be connected to my longstanding idea of facing concepts such as reincarnation or reliving past lives in the context of adaptation and creation.

In sum, Chen Li gives a theory of poetry in *Microcosmos* rather than just presenting a series of modern haiku variations. We read the following verses in order from *Microcosmos I* to *Microcosmos II*:

I like the shopping bag you left behind: / I carry in it freshly-written haiku, lemon cake / post-rain mountain scenes. (*Microcosmos* I-91)

I am not as skilled as the old gardener: I mark the ground / limit myself, plowing with my pen / a few new varieties of *Les Fleurs du mal*. (*Microcosmos* II-19)

A trip for landscape or family: / after the concave mountains and convex waters merge—/ the return to a vast blank space. (*Microcosmos* II-15)

Drawing material from the human world / sitting in rows with heaven and earth / arranging my haikus. (*Microcosmos* II-41)

Perhaps writing three-line poems patterned after the Japanese haiku is to “impose restriction on oneself,” but Chen Li takes advantage of the blankness of traditional haiku and incorporates his observations from life. Sometimes Tablada’s and Paz’s poems become Chen Li’s shopping bags; he puts his haiku in these bags to produce new significance.

Regarding innovative images in haikus, Chen Li explains from the concept of iconography:

In the dictionary, a dead bug is pressed: / Flipping under the sunlight, it transforms / into a new word. (*Microcosmos* I-33)

Poetry is both addition and multiplication, adding / maidens for myriad wonders— and multiply—riding galaxies: / recklessly riding a train with the unimaginable. (*Microcosmos* II-29)

Why turn profanity into poetry? / Why recycle life into love songs? / Why let officials infiltrate the backed-up? Why let reality infiltrate fiction? (*Microcosmos* II-73)

The most intriguing aspect of Chen’s work is that, within a highly condensed form requiring meticulous calculation of words, Chen Li manages to grasp the imagery and concreteness of haiku poetry. He transforms rhetorical strategies, creating a poetic aesthetic that blends the classical and the contemporary, the refined and the commonplace. Yet throughout this, he still holds onto his fundamental view of poetry: “The joy of poetry lies in its creativity, not in the political messages or moral lessons it conveys” (Chen 1995: 60). Besides his poetic perspective, he expresses a sentiment toward certain conservative attitudes in the poetry world, writing, “The deeper we sink into the forms of poetry, the more the world / rises like the chaotic Tower of Babel / relying on fiction, we maintain the book that leans” (*Microcosmos* II-99), reminding us that the diversity of language should make forms a foundation for creativity rather than a constraint on it. The final poem in Chen’s collection encapsulates the two major themes mentioned above, along with the modern elements of “drawing materials from the human world,” narrative language, and contemporaneity:

I’ll minimize my poetic form, making it / smaller than a disc, bigger than the world
/ a replicable and rewritable microcosmos. (*Microcosmos* II-100)

IV. Modernity in Translated Cross-cultural Haikus

In the recreation of Japanese haikus through Latin American haikus, we can consider if a target language can attain the status of a source language. To do so, it must invoke or challenge authorities, dissolve ambiguities, and evolve until new words and meanings emerge within the target language itself (Liu 1995: 26). In other words, when engaging with historic issues, poets—through the power of translating exotic experiences—can revitalize the cultural agency of the target language. Can the heterogeneous experience of translation thus lead us into the discussion of modernity? In fact, Chen Li continues to experiment with his translanguing practices, and we can examine the construction of modernity in his work. Now the mutual reference between Chen Li and the two Mexican poets in haiku can be said to be a return to the specific historical time and space in the non-Western context and the evolution of contemporary thought, to have a fundamental dialogue, and to challenge the framework of the “Oriental imagination” itself.

Let’s take a look at modern haikus by Chen Li and the two poets:

Chen Li ←	Paz’s “ <i>Neighbor Afar</i> ” ←	Tablada’s “ <i>Monkey</i> ”
石榴，在雨中 潮濕地綠著	昨夜一株白楊 本來打算說—	小猴子看著我 想告訴我某個

彷彿有話要說 A pomegranate, wet and green in the rain, seems to have something to say. (<i>Microcosmos</i> I-87)	卻沒開口 ¹⁵ Anoche, un álamo, a punto de hablarme, callase	它忘了的事情 ¹⁶ El pequeño mono me mira... ¡Quisiera decirme Algo que se le olvida!
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These three pieces have a shared theme —“when trying to specify I forget why” or “desiring argument, one stops and feels speechless (欲辯已忘言),” a concept found in the Jin dynasty poet Tao Yuanming’s poem series “Drinking.” In the “Drinking” poems, Tao uses “you” to question reality, but he is actually asking himself, replacing “you” with “I” (Tu 2006: 124). This technique is commonly employed in traditional Chinese literature. In *The Siren and the Seashell: And Other Essays on Poets and Poetry*, Octavio Paz also indicates “the monkey” refers to Tablada himself (Paz 1976: 61). These three poems reflect how the poets are trying to say something, but they forget to speak. Tao can’t say anything because he experienced the natural scenery with aesthetic feelings, so beautiful that he can’t find words to describe these profound meanings. The “white space” here opens up the limits of languages and this is the key to writing haikus.

Interestingly, Chen Li comes to understand Paz’s speechlessness when translating “Neighbor Afar”. Paz once said that the monkey in “Monkey” by Tablada is terrifying, because “Tablada implied that monkeys see themselves in us, instead of us think of our past” (Paz 1976: 61). The right-to-left order refers to the sequence of influence among the poems. That is, through intertext analysis, perspectives can change: A poplar tree in Paz’s poem can be seen as a retrospect in which people are not the subject; the wet and green pomegranate in the rain in Chen Li’s work is an open mouth seemingly ready to talk. They all contribute to Tao’s speechlessness, but the beginning of the change is translation, a type of reading. The analysis is a response to Chen Li’s theory of poetry. The loop of Japanese and Mexican haiku has come full circle to fuel the modernity of the poetic aesthetic here.

V. Conclusion

Chen Li’s work helps to bring the multi-layered culture of haikus to light. Translation is reading. In the process of translating and writing, there is the question of how one embraces the task. That is to say, the translator’s upbringing and sense of aesthetic guide their reading and translation. Cultural others are empty symbols waiting for the translators to assign meanings to them. To Chen Li, Mexican haikus may have made the part of his loop of translation and writing where his

¹⁵ Translated by Chen Li, see Chen and Chang 1989: 79.

¹⁶ Translated by Chen Li, see Tablada 2022: 183.

innovative opportunities lie. The complexity of this gives us a glimpse of how cross-cultural trans-lingual experiences can be the driving force of modern poetry as it emerges from the late 20th century and enters the early 21st century. Hopefully, this Mexican experience can help to establish a cross-cultural framework. Chen Li's creation took place through Mexican poets as they were learning from Japanese haikus. These Mexican haikus were also translated by Chen Li. The center of the literary world may be shifting. Furthermore, in haikus' trans-lingual practice, we not only notice the innovative forms but how the mixture of different cultures opens up new possibilities in the way we see the world. To sum up, both Mexican poets and Chen Li live in their time. No matter whether translating or writing, they are searching for ways to appropriately integrate other cultures. In other words, in the process of the localization of haikus and accepting or resisting other cultures, a Taiwanese/ Mexican multi-layered culture is progressively in the making.

In Joyce Chi-Hui Liu's critique of Chen Li's poetry, she concludes: "If Taiwan anticipates the emergence of a new culture and new artistic forms, it cannot perpetually regard the primal mother and the symbolic system of the Imaginary Father as the objects of seamless stitching... Poets must, like the mother goddess, establish their own creative origins, push words away from the oral cavity, and create new text... giving rise to fresh meanings and forms" (Liu: 363-364). *Microcosmos* is heading in this direction, setting up both a new Taiwanese cultural aesthetic and an internationally recognized trans-lingual practice.

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