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Five Rings by Chen Li

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Elaine Wong
Five Rings

Chen Li
五環

— *Olympic wind: convivial, competitive, of five rings...of words and words*



Elaine Wong
Five Rings, linear version

Chen Li
五環

— *Olympic wind: convivial, competitive, of five rings...of words and words*

Olympic wind gusts from Mount Olympus, compressing the gods' private words and private works in transparent, ultra-thin discs of light, spinning and sending them on to reach the five realms and four sides, and, when you are not noticing, gently wafting over Mount Parnassus, to be printed as poems by the Muses...

Of five rings, of five realms, of synergy: a self-breeding microcosmos. Swords and spears forge signposts. Hand basins adopt oaths without bloodshed. The five continents' ancient arms are renewed by laurels of rushing waves in the round basins; five-color bubbles foam up, a fairy tale serial.

Convivial, jovial, digital/gaming, the past links through the present, the four seas are one family, a cell phone is a stadium, a laptop is a temple. Drinks reward brains wracking, victory parties honor efforts, rings of perspiration pay homage to the earth as entertainment tax, a selfless celebration.

Of words and words: in ink, cold spring, hot spring, fountain, sauna, all cleanse nerves and foot odor. Father and daughter-in-law bathe together, black and white bathe together, Hermaphroditus bathes: mixing fine and foul to purify and innovate, a stunning Venus rises from foam, from a sea of words.

Competitive, a gymnastic friendly for leaf, olive, cinnamon, parsley, pine twig... Light presents shadows as awards to the winners. At dusk, the gods withdraw to be the observers behind the night screen, sign their names with starlight. Across the Milky Way, a dazzling tug-of-war between brain/strength and beauty.

Commentary

Chen Li (陳黎, 1954–) was born in Hualien, Taiwan, and is a prolific poet and translator working in the Chinese language. He has published fourteen poetry books and four essay collections so far. While his own poetry has been translated widely into English, French, Spanish, Dutch, German, Croatian, Japanese, and Korean, Chen Li has translated, in collaboration with his wife Zhang Fen-ling, the works of Yosana Akiko, Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, Sylvia Plath, Wisława Szymborska, Tomas Tranströmer, and other poets into Chinese. His poetry and translations have been honored by prestigious awards in his country.

I came into contact with Chen Li through my research on Taiwan visual poetry, to which the poet has made significant contributions. I interviewed him in summer 2014 during a research trip sponsored by Taiwan's National Central Library. Talking with Chen Li face to face, I felt strongly the brilliance inside the poet; the energy fueling a swift mind constantly shone through his eyes. At the same time, he told me about his hand injury in late 2011 that prevented him from writing and typing. More extensive physical pain followed and eventually led to bouts of depression. He had to decline an invitation to represent Taiwan at the Poetry Parnassus in London, an event coinciding with the London Olympics in 2012. Chen Li resumed writing when his condition improved. He wrote "Five Rings" (五環) in February 2013, revisiting the motif of an earlier poem, "Olympic Wind." A visual version of "Five Rings" was published alongside the linear version in his 2013 collection, *Dynasty/Saint* (朝/聖).

In "Five Rings," Chen Li creates an ideal "microcosmos," to use his own word, that celebrates tradition, purity, hard work, originality, and fellowship. In the form of the Olympic symbol, "Five Rings" embodies not only the Olympic spirit but also the spirit of poetry. In the poem, words take part in a relay, as Chen Li describes in the earlier "Olympic Wind," which he calls an *ars poetica*. There, "you can't see them [the words] pass or receive the baton" (line 12, my translation), but the graphics in "Five Rings" bring their movement to view. Each intersection

in the rings offers a chance into a new direction, the potential of which is located in the potential of language.

A few months after our first meeting and with the poet's encouragement, I began to translate some of his poems. I took on "Five Rings" because I was touched by the innocent voice sustained throughout the poem, no matter how wide the spectrum of images is in the poem and how provocative some of them might seem. I was also curious whether the visual poem would translate given the formal constraints. To find an answer, I relied on the English alphabet to guide my way.

My first question during the translation process was how to fit an English translation into the rings containing Chinese characters of more regular and shorter lengths. The double ring design came to mind as a solution that would not only provide more physical space but also resonate with the double nature of translation. With this decision, the contact points of the five rings would be letters appearing in the same position in the outer and inner parts of each ring. I set out to translate the linear version as compactly as I could, again due to concerns of space. Upon completing a first draft, I wrote the English stanzas on cut-out circles in the double ring design and looked for possible contact points. With as much apprehension as excitement, I arranged the circles into the Olympic symbol and turned them around to align all the intersections. After rounds of word adjustment, realignment, shortening or lengthening some phrases to fit the arcs marked off by the intersections, and fine-tuning for meaning, the translation found its way to the present arrangement. Although the translation is far from perfect, I hope it retains the spirit of the relay.

I would like to thank Maya Chen for creating the artwork of the visual poem.