TOWARD A GENERAL POETICS OF CHINESE-WESTERN
CARPE DIEM POETRY: INCLUDING A DESCRIPTION OF THE
ICONICITY-CONVENTIONALITY RELATION IN SIGNIFICATION

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1) Introduction: A Historical Survey

All this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs.
—C. S. Peirce 1931–58, 5.488n)

聖人有以見天下之蹟，而擬諸其形容，象其物宜，故謂之象。
—《易經》

The Saints saw into the obscurity of the universe, approximated its forms, imaged its appropriations, and therefore what they produced were called signs. —_I-Ching_

Iconicity and conventionality are two fundamental forces underlying our cultural reality, perhaps also penetrating the natural world. In the sign production, which perfuses all this universe, including the world of poetry, the making of the signifier and the signified in the De Saussurean dualism, or, the actualization of the Peircean triad (the sign, its object, and its interpretant), involves the working of the force of iconicity and the force of conventionality. Conventionality refers to the force of arbitrariness (i.e., the arbitrary aspect of the choice) and the force of habit, by means of which the choice is made into convention. Iconicity refers to the force of naturalness (i.e., the natural aspect of the choice), and, in our culture, the iconic resemblance or participation always incrines itself in this naturalness. It is evident that these two forces thus defined, the conventionality and the iconicity, do not cancel each other but are simultaneously present in the sign, revealing themselves in varied degrees and in interactive relation.

These two forces are well documented in linguistics (De Saussure 1959; Jakobson and Waugh 1979: Chapter 4) and well expressed in Chinese ideograms (Ku 1981: Chapter 1). Attention to these two forces as manifest in other areas remains inadequate, except perhaps the topic of iconic resemblance (Sebeok 1979: Chapter 6). This inadequacy is by no means a simple accident or neglect in view of the fact that their manifestations are so
varied and complex in these areas. Therefore, in the present paper, I feel satisfied just to describe these two forces within the general poetics of carpe diem poetry instead of attacking them on the front.

The beginning of the carpe diem poetry may be seen as the first sign of culture's own maturity wherein man became self-conscious, became aware of the transient character of life, with existential anxiety. This carpe diem cry was heard everywhere in the ancient world, in Egypt, in India, in Greece, and in China. It is evident that the carpe diem has already established itself as one of the important motifs in the Greek lyrics of the seventh and the sixth century B.C. as seen in Anacreon, in the Anacreontea, and in a number of carpe diem lyrics as collected in the Greek Anthology. The significance of the motif extended to the Roman period, whose carpe diem spokesmen were Catullus and Horace. This Greek-Roman carpe diem tradition received quite a complete revival in the Renaissance in both Europe and England although it never ceased as an influence through the Middle Ages. Two extended researches on the Greek-Roman tradition, its continuity in the Medieval Time, and its revival and modifications in the Renaissance, especially in the English lyrics of the seventeenth century, have been done in the traditional scholarly approach (Wellington 1956; Candelaria 1959). As shown in both researches, Wellington's in particular, the carpe diem types as provided in the Greek-Roman antiquities, namely, the Anacreontic, the Catullan, the Horatian, the libertine, the naturalistic, and so on, fit the later carpe diem lyrics surprisingly well. To be sure, the continuity of the Western carpe diem tradition should not be taken to mean the denial of innovations and changes made to the tradition.

There is no reason not to presume that the Chinese carpe diem poetry did not sprout out from its own soil. In the Chou 周 ballads as collected in the Shih-ching 詩經, a female speaker, mourning for the fleeting time and youth, chants in a balladic tone:

標有梅
頋 beğen之
求我庶士
追其謂之（「標有梅」）
Strike! Strike! The plumes,
All in my bamboo basket, remain on tree no more!
Those gentlemen who would like to win me,
Come and tell. ("Strike! Strike! The Plumes")
And a male speaker in another song sighs,

Cricket in the hall;  
The year draws to a halt. 
If I do not merrily, 
The sun and the moon pass over. ("The Cricket")

Or in another song,

Mountain with varnish trees. Swamp with chestnuts. 
Why not play lute and enjoy day long 
While good food and wine ye have? Merry! 
When ye die, somebody else thine home will occupy. 
("Mountain with Elms")

These carpe diem voices of the Chou ballads were heard no more in many centuries to come, except some faint echoings.

Suddenly, with the decline of the Han Empire, a new voice of carpe diem, which is more solemn and earnest in tone, burst out, as recorded in the Nineteen Old Poems 古詩十九首. Three out of the nineteen are full carpe diem poems while the motif of the fleeting time penetrates the majority of the group. This intense frequency, three out of nineteen, may be seen as an index to the flourish of the carpe diem motif in that time. The grave-mound depression, the underground eternal sleep, the long journey passenger metaphor, the boarding metaphor, the morning dew metaphor, the distrust of the Taoist and Confucian immortality, the night tour with torch, wine and good clothes, all these lay down the basic tenets of the Chinese carpe diem poetry of serious type. This carpe diem voice was immediately echoed in the Wei 魏 Dynasty, especially in the poetry of the emperor-poets of the Ts'ao 曹 Royal Family, and in the Chin 晉 Dynasty, with some modifications.

Perhaps in the Chin Dynasty, or a little later, the carpe diem motif became to bear on
the love or amorous motif as seen in the *Tzu-yeh Ballads* 子夜歌 and the *Tzu-yeh Ballads of Four Seasons* 子夜回時歌, collected in the *Yüeh-fu* 樂府—these two groups of ballads are primarily from the *Chin* 晉 Dynasty but may also include the ballads of two succeeding dynasties, the *Sung* 宋 and the *Ch'i* 齊. The speakers are usually female, in affection and in the undertone of the fleeting time, uttering a praise over the beauty of youth time, a sigh over her loneliness and melancholy in the springtime of life, or wooing her lover to seize the day, or describing a *carpe diem* amorosity—with her lover indoors with music and with torch in the bitter winter night.

The *carpe diem* poetry became to decline afterwards. This contradicts my original expectation since the short dynasties to come were the times notable for their sensual pursuits. On reflection, I become to think that the *carpe diem* anxiety might be eventually driven into oblivion when men became totally indulging themselves in the pleasure although the anxiety itself was the original cause of their pursuit of the pleasure.

The *carpe diem* motif, in both East and West, will never come to a complete stop, but always reaches out for another flourish when such an existential anxiety must be cried out loud again. Yet, my historical survey must stop somewhere and I decide to stop so. And indeed all the primary types in both traditions had been set up since the periods covered in this paper. I have privileged the Chinese tradition in my survey, and in fact this is the first research of Chinese *carpe diem* poetry of any considerable length. The resemblance and the difference between these two traditions give a promise and a challenge to a general poetics of *carpe diem* poetry, and provide a rich area for us to observe the force of iconicity and the force of conventionality. The universal practice of *carpe diem* poetry seems to endorse its iconicity (i.e., naturalness) while the fact that the *carpe diem* is only one of the possible responses to the fleeting time reveals at the same time its conventionality. Meanwhile, an iconism can be seen in the abundance of *carpe diem* tropes, which penetrates both traditions. The relation between these two forces in the *carpe diem* poetry is complex and will be substantially discussed in the conclusion of the paper.

2) The Carpe Diem Time

As we talk, time spites us
and runs; reap today; save no hope for tomorrow.

—Horace, from *Odes* I:11

生年不滿百
長懷千歲憂
Carpe diem is one response to the fleeting time. This preliminary definition endorsed by both traditions reveals both the force of iconicity and the force of conventionality. The universal practice of carpe diem poetry, which gives evidence to the force of iconicity, does not blind us from the fact that time is not necessarily fleeting and the carpe diem response to it is only one of the many possible modes. Indeed, time does not escape from its semiotic nature; even the so-called objective time as perfected by science is in the last analysis an expression of human, or semiotic, desire. The carpe diem time is only one time paradigm among others. Without going out from poetry, we may find a time paradigm completely different from the carpe diem time, which we may call temple time, as expressed in the temple poetry of the Shih-ching where time is frozen as timeless, patched up as a continuity, by a filial linking back to the ancestors and by a shadowing extension to the descendents. Time of the ancestors and the time of the descendents are brought to the present without a break in the temple perception. It is against this temple time and other possible time paradigms, for example, the mythical time, that the carpe diem time takes on its meaning.

The carpe diem time constructs its own paradigm. Time is fleeting, unredeemable, and stops at the end of life. A number of binary oppositions, with a particular alignment of value, may be defined. Life is in opposition to death: while the time before death is cherished, death is described as eternal darkness and sleep, with dread. In the span of life time, a primary division is made: the opposition between youth time and old age—childhood is totally ignored. Youth is always good, not only good in its own terms but also hysterically good in the threat of the dread old age and death, which are projected upon the present as if they were coming immediately. If the past is taken into account, we shall be told that “How long are man’s years? Brief as the morning dew; and the days past are—oh, bitter—already too many!” (Ts’ao Ts’ao, “Short Song”) Life is in opposition to death: while the time before death is cherished, death is described as eternal darkness and sleep, with dread. In the span of life time, a primary division is made: the opposition between youth time and old age—childhood is totally ignored. Youth is always good, not only good in its own terms but also hysterically good in the threat of the dread old age and death, which are projected upon the present as if they were coming immediately. If the past is taken into account, we shall be told that “How long are man’s years? Brief as the morning dew; and the days past are—oh, bitter—already too many!” (Ts’ao Ts’ao, “Short Song”)
fleeting and the threatening of time: “And this same flower that smiles today,/Tomorrow will be dying.” (Robert Herrick, “To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time”) Time is compressed into a single moment, and the process, namely, the beginning, the middle, and the end, is left out as if it did not exist. This close system defines the semiotic nature of the carpe diem time: the time segments find their meanings in opposition to each other in a system.

But time must be regained and conquered. The measurement of time is no longer the objective counting of days and years. To cite just two examples among the many, we are told by Ben Jonson in the West that “Hee, that but living halfe his dayes, dies such,/Makes his life longer then ‘twas given, much” (The Under-Wood, LXXXIX) and by Wang Hsi-Chih 王羲之 in the East that “To seek pleasure in a day,/Equals to living for thousand years.” (“The Orchid Pavilion Poems”) 取樂在一朝，寄之齊千齡（「蘭亭詩」）Time is doubled when it is enjoyed and conquered. Time lost (fleeting) and Time regained (seized) eventually constitute the ultimate binary of the carpe diem time. This conquering sense of carpe diem interacts with its pessimistic overtone and generates a dynamic tension between them. Indeed, this is where the strength of Andrew Marvell’s famous conclusion lies: “Thus, though we cannot make our Sun/Stand still, yet we will make him run.” (“To His Coy Mistress”)

The carpe diem time has established its own iconism. Time is seen in the mutability of nature and in the mutability of the human world. Nature and the human world may be in parallel and may be in contrast. In the former, a natural image is to symbolize the mutability of human life as in the image of withering rose and morning dew. In the latter, nature is projected as something eternal and cyclical while the human world is taken as ever changing and unredeemable: “The Sun dies every night/in the morning he’s there again/you and I, now,/ when our briefly tiny light flicks out,/it’s night for us, one single/ everlasting/Night.” (Catullus, No. 5)

Most time segments in the carpe diem time paradigm have developed their own tropes, which become rather conventional now. When aligned to value, these time segments can be put into two groups, the positive (life, youth, the present) and the negative (death, age, the future). The tropes for the positive group are always metaphors while those for the negative group are more often metonyms (including the use of synecdoche). Yet, it is revealing that the positive value is not fully expressed, or even totally ignored, in these metaphors. The flower metaphor and the fruit metaphor may express a sense of beauty and good, but the morning dew metaphor and the boarding metaphor have nothing to do
with the positive value of life, youth, and the immediate present. We become to know that what is emphasized in these metaphors is the fleetingness rather than the positive value.

At the same time, those metonyms for age and death, the negative group, are highly expressive. The dread of the negative group is fully expressed in the white hair, in the wrinkle, in the decaying, in the gravemound, in the eternal sleep. These metonyms, to be sure, are based on what Jakobson called the contiguous relation, but a resemblance has superimposed on it. On the contrary, when the tropes of the negative group appear as metaphors, such as the everlasting night and endless desert, they do not imply the motif of fleeting time as those in the positive group do; they only illustrate the negative values. All these emphases, combinations, and correlations, constitute the structure of the iconic signification of the *carpe diem* time, and therefore, the *carpe diem* motif. This iconism of the *carpe diem* time illustrates quite well Peirce’s perception that an icon bears a resemblance to the object (2.247), “partaking in the characters of the object” (4.531).

3) The *Carpe Diem* Negations

浩浩陰陽移

年命如朝露

人生忽如寄

壽無金石固

萬歲更相送

聖賢莫能度

服食求神仙

多為藥所誤

不如飲美酒

被服執與素

——古詩十九首之十三

The *yin* and the *yang* in their hughness alternate forever,

But the years Heaven gives to man are like morning dew.

Man’s life is brief as a sojourn,

With not the firmness of metal or stone.

Ten thousand years come and go.

No escape to neither sages nor virtuous men.

Some seek potions in attempt of becoming Taoist Immortals,

But more often end up in poisoning themselves.

Far better to drink good wine,

And clothe oneself in soft white silk.

——from Number 13 of the *Nineteen Old Poems*
I like not him who at his drinking beside the full mixing-bowl tells of strife and lamentable war, but rather one that taketh thought for delightful mirth by mingling the Muses and the splendid gifts of Aphrodite.

—Anacreon, 116

The fleeting time, which is the cause of the carpe diem cry, may be overcome if immortality does exist. Culture has offered many kinds of immortality to fight against the fleeting time; yet, any kind of immortality offered by culture, not by nature, is nothing but semiotic. These immortalities offered by culture may be either present (but to be negated) or non-present, and this presence and non-presence eventually constitutes part of the structure of carpe diem poetry in general. In relation to the concept of markedness as developed in contemporary semiotics (for example, Linda Waugh 1982), the negated immortality or any negated element present in carpe diem poetry is marked, that is to say, taken as something active, significant, endowed with its own properties.

In the Chinese example prepared in this section, the Confucian immortality and the Taoist immortality both are invoked and, as a rule, negated. The Confucian immortality, put forth in the Chinese classic Tso-chuan 左傳, rooted deep in the Chinese mind, refers to the eternal name gained by one’s virtue, achievements, and teachings. The Taoist immortality refers to the belief that man can become immortal in its full sense by Taoist practice and potions—this belief, alluded to in Chuang-tzu 莊子, developed in the Han dynasty, gained its momentum with the decline of the Empire and extended into the Wei and the Chin dynasties that immediately follow. Among all legendary Taoist immortals, Prince Ch’iao 王子喬 is the most famous one. This Prince Ch’iao is referred to in Number 15 of the Nineteen Old Poems partly quoted in the last section—here is the rest of the poem:

為樂當及時
何能待來茲
愚者愛惜費
但為後世嗤
仙人王子喬
難可與等期
Seek pleasures while one may;
How could one wait for the years to come?
Fools cling too fondly to money,
And earn but posterity’s jeers.
Prince Ch’iao, that Taoist immortal—
There is little hope of matching him.

Indeed, the presence of these two modes of immortality in the examples is bound up with the distrust of Confucianism and with the vogue of Taoist practice for immortality, bound up with the urgency of the morning dew metaphor and the gravemound depression, bound up with the decline of the Han empire and the consequent wars and disasters, and bound up, we shall say, with the sudden flourish of carpe diem poetry of China.

The phenomenon of carpe diem negation can be also seen in the Western tradition. But the focus is not placed on mortality-immortality opposition but on some other humanistic levels which are harmful to the carpe diem pursuit. For example, war is the negated element in Anacreon (No. 116, quoted in the beginning of the section), so is moralist view in Catullus (No. 5), and earthly powers in Herrick (“On Himself”). These negations are integral to the poems where they appear, but less essential to the carpe diem struggle than the mortality-immortality dichotomy. Presumably, the dynamic power generated in the carpe diem negations is in proportion to the tension given in the negations, and this explains the fact that I have been drawn to the Chinese tradition and have used it as point of departure in this section.

4) The Carpe Diem Assimilation

Then gather flowers in their prime,
Let them not fall and perish so;
Nature her bountyes did bestow
On vs that wee might vse them: And
Tis coldnesse not to vnderstand
What shee and Youth and Forme perswade
With Oppertunety, that’s made
As we could wish it.

—-Sir Walter Ralegh, “To his Love when hee had obtained Her”

今我不為樂
知有來歲不
命室携童弱
良日登遠遊

一一陶淵明，「酬劉柴桑」
If I do not seek pleasure today,
I am not sure of the coming days.
I order my wife to bring with the children
And set out for an excursion in a good day.

—Tao Yüan-ming, “Reply to Mr. Liu Ch’ai-sang”

The carpe diem motif has projected itself upon other motifs to assimilate and to be assimilated. In this light, the varied types of carpe diem poetry of the West (Wellington 1956) are results of the carpe diem assimilation. All of them are motif complex, which, to have a better view of them, can be decomposed into carpe diem motif and other motifs on the structural level.

Take the Catullan seduction first. To begin with, it is a combination of the carpe diem motif and the motif of seduction. But the seduction motif, we may say, is one of the sub-motif of love motif as a paradigm. On the other hand, the seduction motif is itself a paradigm, which in the carpe diem world contains at least three members, the Catullan, the libertine, and the naturalistic. Further, the seduction implies another motif, namely, the motif of persuasion, no matter if this persuasion is a Catullan courteous invitation, or a shameless libertine threat, or a naturalistic exposition. To move to a larger context, these three modes of persuasion shall bear a relation to other modes of persuasion which have been established, for example, the Platonic and the Provencal persuasions.

The motif common to both the Anacreontic and the Horatian carpe diem types is the motif of conviviality as suggested by Wellington, which covers drinking, conversation, music, love, company, and so on. Surely, the Horatian and the Anacreontic type can not be distinguished from each other on this level. The way out is, as usual, to find a way to decompose the motif and lower down the combinational level until we are at the level on which their distinctive features may be revealed. Take the drinking motif for example. We may decompose the motif in connection with the binary of heavy drinker (drunkenness) and light drinker (soberness) as traditionally suggested, or with the problem of genre—whether or not combined with drinking song. On these two levels, we are able to discriminate the Anacreontic from the Horatian type. A structural description of Anacreontic drinking carpe diem would be: carpe diem + conviviality + drinking + heavy drinker (drunkenness) + literary genre (drinking song). The Horatian drinking carpe diem shares with the Anacreontic type the first three features but is distinguished from it in the last two.

What are the relations between the carpe diem seduction and the carpe diem convi-
viality, or, between the motifs and sub-motifs implied in these two big categories? It seems that there is not particular motivated relation among the implied motifs, but they are not necessarily incongruous to each other—perhaps we may use the term “remote” to describe their relation—except the dynamic relation between the love motif and the seduction motif. Again, the love motif and the seduction motif may be re-defined as love-without-seduction and love-with-seduction; here “love” is termed such as to cover both. How about the marriage motif? The same process of subsuming may be used so that these three may be put under the same heading of love motif. The whole system, with the help of the symbols of presence (+) and absence (−), may be formulated as follows: love motif ± seduction motif ± marriage motif.

When the traditional categories are broken down such we find ourselves entering the world of motifs provided by culture, structured in hierarchical, paradigmatic relations, interrelated with other genres and fields. But, all these combinations and interconnections may be seen, if we would like to traverse from the De Saussurean to the Peircean territories, as a simulacrum of the ongoing process of Peirce’s unlimited semiosis, by which one may “ultimately reach a Sign of itself, containing its own explanation and those of all its significant parts; and according to this explanation each such part has some other part as its Object” (2.230). The Sign in itself in the present pursuit is the Sign of carpe diem poetry.

Candelaria’s statement that “the carpe diem motif has a way of weaving itself into situations where it would not seem likely to expect to find it” (p. 47) expresses the complexity and ambiguity of the carpe diem assimilation very well. It is always difficult to decide which assimilates which between the carpe diem motif and the motifs involved. For example, in Herrick’s “To the Virgins” the question as to whether it is more a carpe diem motif or a marriage motif remains. Or, is Raleigh’s poem prepared in the beginning of the section more a naturalistic disguise of seduction than a carpe diem motivation, or the otherwise? Or, in the case of Anacreon, it remains ambiguous as to whether those relevant poems are more carpe diem poetry or drinking song: a genre problem. Indeed, a carpe diem assimilation always involves a tension between the carpe diem motif and the motifs combined, and by no means could ambiguity be totally avoided. But there is no fear in it. Needless to say, this assimilation and ambiguity and the analytic model apply to the Chinese carpe diem poetry too as we might have noted from the Chinese examples.
5) The Syntactic and Verbal Components of *Carpe Diem* Poetry

Go, lovely rose,
Tell her that wastes her time and me,
That now she knows,
When I resemble her to thee,
How sweet and fair she seems to be.

—Edmund Waller, "Go, Lovely Rose"

We observe that *carpe diem* poetry is persuasion-oriented and this orientation finds expression in the syntactic (structural) and verbal particularities. In terms of the Jakobsonian speech model (Jakobson 1960), it is the addressor-addressee dialogue that motions the *carpe diem* structures and verbal expressions, in company with those poetic features common to poetry in general. The presence (both explicit and implicit) of an addressee is the essential structural feature of *carpe diem* poetry. The addressee may be actual (for example, in Horace’s poems) or imaginary; may appear in name (for example, Leuconoë in Horace’s famous ode) or in the second person pronoun (you, ye, etc.); may be the addressor himself appearing in the first person pronoun “I” (for example, “The Crickets,” *Shih Ching*). If any of these explicit forms of an addressee is not seen in a *carpe diem* poem, an addressee without a name can still be strongly felt due to its syntactic and verbal particularities which enunciate the presence of such an addressee. In this case, the implied addressee can be identified with the addressor himself; that is to say, the addressor is addressing to himself as an addressee. In the Chinese poetic tradition, the first person “I” is often omitted, especially in the poetry since the *Han* dynasty. In view of this, the presence of “I” in the *Chou* ballads and the absence of “I” in the examples from the *Nineteen Old Poems* do not make much difference: in both cases, the speaker is speaking
to himself in a persuasive mode.

The persuasive nature of *carpe diem* poetry is embodied in the addressor-addresssee dialogue as already observed. Obviously, an addressee in the second person is essential to the amorous types, the seductions in particular, in both Eastern and Western traditions. For the comparative interest, we may note in passing that the second person addressee is usually a female in the Western *carpe diem* tradition, while in the Chinese counterpart, it is the male that takes up the role of the second person addressee. Another comparative point may be noted: in non-amorous *carpe diem* poems, the Western tradition favors an addressee of second person while the Chinese tradition prefers an addressee in the first person. These differences between two traditions are a matter of choice, a matter of convention, and perhaps also a matter of social variance.

If we would like to stretch our conception of this addressor-addresssee dominance a little further, we may say the device of dual dialogue and mixed addressee is a phenomenon of assimilation, that is to say, the component parts of a *carpe diem* poem become dialogized because of the dialogue nature of the genre. Edmound Waller’s “Go, Lovely Rose,” an example prepared in this section, is a case at hand. The poem is a dual dialogue in which the rose plays a dual role: it is an addressee in relation to the poet and addressor in relation to the lady to whom the whole message is addressed.

The persuasive orientation is correlated with the particularities on the syntactic and verbal levels. The most common devices are perhaps the subjunctive argument, the conditional argument, and some persuasive, argumentative verbal markers, such as “and then,” “why not,” “better,” “let us,” and so on. Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” is perhaps the best example of the subjunctive argument, in which a timeless and endless world is presented in the subjunctive mood, to be negated of course. The conditional argument applies to a great variety of situations and therefore very powerful. The argument implies a cause-and-effect persuasion, which is an argumentative disguise in order to persuade in favor of the *carpe diem* pursuits more than an exercise of logical truth. Examples and situations are many, but I only quote one here: “Or if that golden fleece must grow/For ever free from aged snow;/If those bright suns must know no shade,/Nor your fresh beauties ever fade;/Then fear not, Celia, to bestow/What, still being gather’d, still must grow.” (Thomas Carew, “Persuasions to Enjoy”)

6) Conclusions: The Iconicity-Conventionality Relation

I have followed a moderate notion of poetics whose trajectory is defined “between
two extremes, the very particular and the excessively general," (Todorov 1981: 11) retaining the diachronic notion in the synchronic system, taking the concrete features into account—the word "general" in my title is to indicate only the crossing of national boundaries. Narratology has already been advanced by the notion of narrative motifs or functions as developed in the contemporary criticism. But it is rather a regret that the same powerful tool which could open up the semantics of the text remains unseen. At the same time, it occurs to me that we may revive the conceptual sense of motif and develop it into a tool to decompose and recompose the semantics of the text in a structural-semiotic mode, in the same way as the architectural sense of motif is developed in contemporary narratology. So I try in this paper to show, in an experimental and illustrative spirit, the possibility of constructing a system of motif to account for the semantics of carpe diem poetry as I did in my studies of Wang Wei’s Wang River Sequences (Ku 1983–84; 1984b: 231–286).

In its general and original form, the carpe diem motif is an existential cry under the threat of the fleeting time. This may be put in the form of a formula: human transitoriness → its awareness → anxiety → seize the day. But the carpe diem formula is not as natural and iconic as it might appear to be. In the last analysis, “transitoriness” or “fleeting time” is a human concept, semiotic in nature, or at least partly semiotic. Besides, there is always other direction and complication in the space between any two stages, occupied by the sign of an arrow. Obviously, in all the blank spaces and all the stages as well in the carpe diem formula, the force of iconicity and the force of conventionality try to override and undercut each other.

Then the carpe diem motif is described in its intension and extension, that is to say, in the carpe diem negation and assimilation. The negations, usually bound up with their environments, are invoked and negated as to give more force to the raison de être of the carpe diem choice, which is of course a manifestation of the force of iconicity (i.e., naturalness). While the carpe diem negation constitutes a structure internal to the carpe diem motif, the carpe diem assimilation extends the motif to other areas. The assimilations are variable and sometimes lead to ambiguity—we do not know which assimilates which, whether the carpe diem motif assimilates the motifs involved or the otherwise. The variety of carpe diem assimilations, especially in view of the differences in this area between the Western and the Chinese tradition, reveals perhaps more the force of conventionality (arbitrariness and permaence of convention) than the force of iconicity.

There is the second sense of iconicity, namely, the Peircean iconic resemblance or
participation, which penetrates almost all the levels of *carpe diem* poetry. The *carpe diem* time, the *carpe diem* persuasion, and the *carpe diem* pleasure, all are expressed in images, metaphors, metonyms, or just icons. This iconism can even be seen in the relation between the semantics (the motifs) and the syntactic, verbal components as approached in this paper. Yet, as Eco has correctly noticed, any iconic representation and recognition must involve the working of conventions. (Eco 1976: 3.5)

The persuasive nature, which penetrates the semantic, syntactic, and verbal components, surfaces the modelling function of poetry as developed in the contemporary semiotic poetics (for example, Lotman 1977). The semiotic subject is speaking and listening to his own voice in spite of the presence of an addressee presumably to be addressed in the *carpe diem* poetry. By such speaking and listening, the *carpe diem* subject models the world and models himself. The *carpe diem* anxiety is raised and may be dispersed in the semiotic cry. Yet, it is not only the impulse of the *carpe diem*, the threat of the fleeting time, that gives rise to the *carpe diem* poetry, but also the impulse of writing itself. But writing is also conventional—the linguistic, literary, cultural conventions must be obeyed and violated. This may be seen more clearly in those *carpe diem* poems which are derivative in nature and ambiguous in their mutual assimilations with other motifs. Eventually, the *carpe diem* poetry, like any other type of poetry, is a semiotic situation, a semiotic production. As a result of production, the universe is perfused with more signs.*

*A bibliographical note. All the quotations from the Western *carpe diem* poems, except those from Catullus and Horace, are taken from Wellington and Candelaria’s researches. Here I indicate the pages from where the quotations are taken for the sake of reference: Herrick’s “To the Virgins” (*W*, 226); Ben Johnson’s *The Under-Wood*, LXXXIX (*W*, 83); *Anacreon*, 116 (C, 7); Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” (*W*, 196–197); Releigh’s “To his Love when hee had obtained Her” (*W*, 365–366); Waller’s “Go, Lovely Rose” (C, 232–233); Carew’s “Persuasions to Enjoy” (*W*, 177–178). All the quotations are partial only, except *Anacreon*, 116. As to the Chinese *carpe diem* tradition, all the examples, except those from *Shih-ching*, are taken from Lu Ch’in-Li’s 遼欽立 complete collection of Chinese poetry up to the Six Dynasties. My statistics shows there are about 70 poems which may be considered as *carpe diem* poems in Lu’s collection. Also for the purpose of reference, I indicate here the pages from which the examples are taken: *The Nineteen Old Poems*, 13, 15 (*Lu*, 332–333); *Tzu-yeh Ballads*, 16 (*Lu*, 1041); Tao Yuan-ming’s “Reply to Mr. Liu Ch’ai-sang” (*Lu*, 978); Ts’ao Ts’ao’s “Short Song” (*Lu*, 349); Wang Hsi-Chih’s “The Orchid Pavilion Poems” (*Lu*, 896). Again, except *The Nineteen Old Poems*, 15 and *Tzu-yeh Ballads*, 16, all quotations are only partial.
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