Lord Byron's "The Isles of Greece" : First Translations

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Byron was one of the first Western men of letters to be introduced to China, and he has had a tremendous impact on modern Chinese literary history. Many major writers of the May Fourth period devoted their energies, in one way or another, to introducing this English Romantic to a Chinese audience, both as a poet and as a personality. Chinese translations of his poetry appeared earlier than translations of Shakespeare. The sixteen segments from Dāo Juān known as "The Isles of Greece", one of his most heroic poems, exists in as many as fourteen Chinese versions. His popularity in China has lain primarily in his participation in the Italian independence movement and his last heroic actions in Greece. To match one's deeds with one's words has since ancient times been held a virtue by Chinese men of moral integrity. The rebellion against social conventions and the revolutionary spirit revealed in his works greatly enhanced his reputation in China in the early decades of this century. The translations of "The Isles of Greece" played a seminal role in promoting the Byronic spirit and were a highly successful literary exercise. Its popularity during this period is easily understood in the contemporary political situation. As Lu Xun pointed out later, "In fact, the reason why Byron was so well-known in China at that time... was because of his assistance to the cause of Greek independence. During the last years of the Qing dynasty, revolutionary thought prevailed among a section of Chinese youth. Any cry for revenge and rebellion was bound to have a response" (1963: 317–18).

This paper attempts to analyse in some detail the translations of Byron's "The Isles of Greece" by Liang Qichao (1858–1927), Ma Junwu (1881–1942), Su Manshu (1884–1918), and Hu Shi (1891–1962), who were all poets in
their own right. I shall discuss the strength and weakness of individual translations, the poetic forms they adopted, and the methods they used to tackle the problems of historical and cultural allusions, and demonstrate what was retained and what was lost in translating Byron's poetry.¹

The original poem is a song sung by a wandering singer, which appears in Canto III of Byron's masterpiece Don Juan. Its message is to stir up the patriotic spirit of the Greeks, then under Turkish rule, by alluding with poignant sarcasm to their ancient glories, which is a recurring theme in Byron's poetry.

In modern Chinese literary history, the late Qing writers have been the only generation to put more emphasis, at least for a time, on the introduction and translation of foreign works than on their own creative writing. This is because the introduction of foreign works was conceived of as a weapon in social reform. Liang Qichao was a leader of this trend. So in his first novel Xin Zhongguo weiti Ji (The Story of New China) published in 1902, Liang quoted two short passages from Byron's The Giaour and "The Isles of Greece" respectively, giving the original English and providing a verse translation of both.² During the period when he was in Japan, Liang read a large number of Western books in Japanese translation. He himself hardly knew any English despite the fact that he used some English expressions in his writings. He did his translation with the help of his student Luo Chang, who interpreted for him orally.

The first half of the story is mainly composed of party constitutions designed by Liang for ideal revolutionary parties of his own imagination. The second half basically consists of newspaper cuttings and conversations between the two main characters of the story, Huang Keqiang and Li Qubing, both revolutionaries of course, discussing the major political issues of the day, criticizing the corruption of the government, and debating how to carry out their political reforms.

Byron's poems appear in the second half of the story. When Mr. Huang and Mr. Li have settled down in a small inn, they overhear a "bleak but vigorous" voice coming from the adjacent room, singing Byron's poems in English to the accompaniment of a foreign musical instrument. At this point, Liang Qichao gives the two passages from Byron together with his translations. The themes of these two passages are basically the same. For our purpose, I cite only the original lines from "The Isles of Greece" below.

The isles of Greece, the isles of Greece! Where burning Sappho loved and sung,
Where grew the arts of war and peace,
Where Delos rose and Phoebus sprung! Eternal summer gilds them yet,
But all, except their sun, is set.
The mountains look on Marathon,
And Marathon looks on the sea:
And musing there an hour alone,
. I dream'd that Greece might still be free.
For, standing on the Persian's grave,
I could not deem myself a slave. (I & III)

Following his translation Liang paraphrased in prose, through the conversation of the two characters, other lines from "The Isles of Greece":

And must thy lyre, so long divine,
Degenerate into hands like mine? (V, 5-6)
For Greeks a blush—for Greece a tear. (VI, 6)
A tyrant; but our masters then
Were still, at least, our countrymen. (XI, 5-6)
But, gazing on each glowing maid
To think such breasts must suckle slaves. (XV, 4 & 6)
A land of slaves shall ne'er be mine—
Dash down you cup of Samian wine! (XVI, 5-6)

These lines cover essentially what Byron says in the whole poem. The meaning is clear enough in the poem itself, but Liang was still not content, as if he feared that his readers might not be able to get his message. In between and after these passages, Liang interpolated comments by Huang and Li to explain the contexts of the poems and to indicate his purpose in quoting them. During the interval between The Giaour and "The Isles of Greece", Mr. Huang says:

Byron loves freedom above anything else. He seems to have been born a great writer and a lover of Greece... he died in the Greek army fighting for the independence of Greece. He can be regarded as the first great hero among writers. He wrote this passage [The Giaour] to encourage the Greek people, but it sounds to us now as if the passage were addressed to China. (Liang 1914: 903)
When the first stanza of "The Isles of Greece" is over, Mr. Li gives his annotation: "This is the first stanza of 'The Isles of Greece' from chapter eighty-six in Act [sic] III of Don Juan. He [Byron] was warning the Greeks through another person's mouth." Then Li comments again when the singing stops, "Although the poem is the voice of a subjugated nation, it gives the reader the needed encouragement and power." Then he provides a brief summary of the rest of the poem and says, "It seems that every word of it is addressed to the Chinese people of today" (Liang 1914: 904–905).

Obviously, Liang quoted Byron in the same manner and with the same intention as Byron 'quotes' the singer in Don Juan. It is simply another way of saying that in order to build the new China he described in the beginning of the story, China needs people like Byron. However slight his knowledge about Western literature may have been (he even mistook Don Juan for a play and hence used the term "Act"), he recognized Byron as a great patriot, a man true to his word, qualities a true Confucian scholar would respect. China's precarious situation as a sovereign state, which foreign powers were gradually dividing up, was comparable to that of Greece under Turkish oppression. Liang was so preoccupied with the political content of his story that he did not bother to make the story convincing. It is hardly plausible that Huang and Li could have known Byron's poetry by heart, down to the canto and stanza numbers. It is equally hard to imagine what kind of music it would have been and how the young man would have sung Byron's poems. It is interesting, however, to note the description of the singer, this "handsome young man". He is a military school graduate with great aspirations to save his country. Tired of seeing the corruption in the official circles, he has resigned his office and has been wandering for years across the country looking for people who cherish the same ideals. He, like his author, is an enthusiastic admirer of Milton and Byron, for their revolutionary deeds rather than their literary achievements. He is concerned about the future of his country, and is particularly upset by the Russian troops stationed in the Northeast. "His extraordinary knowledge, his lofty aspiration and spirit make him an ideal hero for China's future" (Liang 1914: 910). The close analogy between this lone, ambitious, patriotic, melancholy wandering soul and Byron in Europe suggests that it was the image of Byron that Liang Qichao had in mind, that he was creating a Chinese version of Byron in this character.

As a literary creation, The Story of New China never made much of a mark. It has seldom been collected in anthologies other than Liang's own, and has hardly been mentioned by critics in literary discussions. But his translation of "The Isles of Greece", short and incomplete as it is, had a great influence on the younger generation of the time. All the contemporary translators of the poem read and admired Liang's translation and were influenced by it to a greater or lesser extent. Lu Xun was strongly affected "intellectually and emotionally" by reading it; Su Manshu ranked it above Ma Junwu's version; Hu Shi was so impressed by the beauty of diction that he almost gave up his own effort half way (1970: 14). Not only did Liang set off this 'Byron craze' or 'The Isles of Greece' craze', to be exact, he also set the tone for the Chinese image of Byron. In fact, "The Isles of Greece" became so popular that five complete translations came out over the next two decades, while Byron's other works were barely translated. And most Chinese readers learned about Don Juan and Byron through this "thrilling, immortal lyric".

Three years later, equally moved by Byron's poem and unsatisfied with Liang's partial translation, Ma Junwu rendered "The Isles of Greece" into Chinese in its entirety, and it was published a few years later in Xin wenxue (New Literature). Ma was one of the founding members of Dr Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary organization in Japan. He had studied chemistry in Japan and metallurgy in Germany. He served as minister and provincial governor during the early Republican period, and later in his life he became a university president. His writings and translations cover a wide range: science, social sciences, and humanities. Among the authors he translated were Goethe, Byron, Schiller, Darwin, Rousseau, and Tolstoy.

Compared with Liang Qichao, Ma had the advantage of knowing the English language, so he could read Byron in the original. One of the outstanding features of his translation of "The Isles of Greece" is its readability, or 'singability'. Although he made a number of mistakes, innocent or intentional, in many places his version reads better and smoother than others. Many beautiful lines are still treasured by students of literature today. The influence of Ma's version, and of "The Isles of Greece" itself, is also reflected in the earliest history of English literature ever written by a Chinese which I know of. Wang Jing, the author, quoted the complete translation by Ma Junwu, taking up more than half of the short section on Byron (1920: 68–72). The poem is known in China as "Ai Xila" (Alas for Greece), for which Ma Junwu set the tone for the Chinese image of Byron. The original does not have a title and, when published separately from Don Juan, it usually takes the first line "The Isles of Greece" as its title. Ma's translation is "Ai Xila ge" (The song, Alas for Greece). Later translators have followed suit by using either "Ai Xila" or "Xila ge". The addition of
Ma's translation of the couplet (a) is more inspired and creative than Su Manshu's and Hu Shi's versions, for it is authentic and beautiful Chinese poetry; and it is also closer to the original in sense. Strangely, both Su Manshu and Hu Shi had read Ma's version, but neither of them captured the original meaning. Su used something like "I am a useless person and have to hand over this instrument [lyre] to others"; Hu borrowed ideas from both Ma and Su and his version is still enigmatic. As for the sixth stanza, (b), Ma Junwu did not quite understand the meaning. He simply re-wrote the quatrain, using some of Byron's words, re-arranging them, but losing the connection between them. Only the concluding couplet is preserved. In the last example (c), considering the classical form he used, the antithesis reads perfectly all right, but the addition of the plaintiveness and discordance of the music makes the whole stanza sadder than necessary.

What interests us is the changes he made to Byron's original poem, which reveal his own viewpoint. Sometimes he even sought to improve the original ideas in order to make the English hero more acceptable to the Chinese reader. This kind of practice was quite popular during the late Qing and early Republican periods. But being always conscious of this kind of change, modern critics sometimes tend to over-emphasize the translators' ulterior motives and misconstrue genuine errors for deliberate changes. The most representative of Ma Junwu's alteration as well as comprehension errors is his translation of the following stanzas.

(a) And must thy lyre, so long divine,
    Degenerate into hands like mine? (V, 5–6)

欲作神聖希臘歌 [I wish I could make a sacred song of Greece]
才薄奈希臘何 but, with my limited talent, I am helpless.

(b) 'Tis something in the dearth of fame,
    Though linked with a fettered race,
    To feel at least a patriot's shame,
    Even as I sing, suffuse my face;
    For what is left the poet here?
For Greeks a blush—for Greece a tear. (VI)

一朝宮庭盡灰燼 [Overtight, the sacred temple has turned to ashes,]
可憐國運傾為奴 [The people, sadly, have become slaves.]
光榮忽驚夕陽沒 [Glory has sunk with the evening sun,]
名譽都隨秋草枯 [Praise withered with autumn grass.]
豈無國士生列島 [Surely patriotic heroes remain on the islands,]
追念舊時慷慨抱 [Recalling the past with grief.]
我今漂泊背詩人 [I am a wandering poet.]
對此淒然死不早 [I am ashamed I have survived]
吁嗟乎 [Alas]
我為希臘幾嘆聲 [For Greece I frown.]
我為希臘一瘡哭 [For Greece I weep.]

(c) The hero's harp, the lover's lute (II, 2)

萬玉哀嘆俠子瑟 [Plaintive notes of the hero's harp]
群珠亂落美人琴 [Broken harmonies of the beauty's lute]

In this stanza, apart from the mistranslation of the first line, the whole stanza was re-written. Ma even changed Byron's disdainful sarcasm in the lines 3.
and 4 into a strong determination to wipe out invaders, still using some of Byron's own words. This cannot possibly be a misunderstanding, especially when we look at the next example, in which the translator's didactic purpose is more clearly demonstrated.

Fill high the bowl with Samian wine!
We will not think of themes like these!
It made Anacreon's song divine:
He served—but served Polycrates—
A tyrant; but our masters then
Were still, at least, our countrymen.

The tyrant of the Chersonese
Was freedom's best and bravest friend;
That tyrant was Miltiades!
O! that the present hour would lend
Another despot of the kind!
Such chains as his were sure to bind.  (XI-XII)

The original message is clear enough: even Miltiades, though a tyrant himself, would be able to unite the people to fight against foreign enemies. But Ma Junwu's translation of the second half of the eleventh stanza (XI, 4-6) is bewildering. It can be roughly translated back into English prose as:

In the old days, political decisions were made by the will of the majority...
through three reprints, though limited, covers most of the major Byronic themes. His name has frequently been associated with Byron by Chinese readers. This is due to a number of factors: Su Manshu was the first important Byron translator; his life of thirty-five years, comparable to Byron’s life (Byron died at thirty-six), was characterized by a mixture of melancholy, nostalgia, delicate sentimentalism, and revolutionary enthusiasm; his seemingly neurotic behaviour and disarming personality had an aura of fascination about them; and finally, his poems manifest a unique personal freshness as well as a sort of ‘modern flavour’ in keeping with admiration and deliberate self-identification with Byron. In spite of his versatility in fiction, poetry, and painting, Su Manshu is best remembered as a translator of Western poetry, and particularly the translator of Byron.

As William Ruddick aptly points out, “Byron’s poetry often invites audience identification and the fact his poems brought to surface so many of the concealed urges and pressures of the age increases their appeal” (1981: 29). Su Manshu felt strongly the urges and pressures of the time. The chief model he turned to for spiritual support for almost everything he did was Byron. Traits of this Western mentor can be found in his poems and essays as well as in his personality and life-style. He once described Byron’s poems as being “like a stimulating liquor—the more one drinks, the more one feels the sweet fascination”. The reason why he enjoyed Byron’s work can be explained by the similarities between their personalities and experiences. In the Turkish conquest of Greece, Su saw a parallel to the subjugation of China by the Manchus against whom he fought bravely in his youth. Being a man with a strong national pride, he was immensely impressed by the relevance of this spirited poem to his time and felt inspired by Byron’s heroic militant efforts in Greece. In his translation, he interpreted Byron’s poem to utter his own views about his people and the fate of his country. During the time when he did the translation, he was a lonely wanderer in Japan, distressed by his fate and that of his country which was still under the corrupt rule of the Manchus. There was not a single soul upon whom he could rely for comfort and understanding. It was natural that the pathetic exile, Childe Harold, would arouse his nostalgic feelings and “The Isles of Greece” incite his nationalistic indignation. Essentially, his enjoyment and translation of Byron were compensatory. He turned to Byron as if to a pre-existent pattern of his own suffering which afforded him both self-expression and catharsis.

Su Manshu did not develop a theory of translation as his famous contemporary Yan Fu did. But some fragmentary remarks from his prose works provide us with a general idea of his attitude towards translation. He stressed time and again that it was important for the translation to stay close to the original in style and spirit. In fact, he believed that the beauty of poetry consisted of its basic poetic style and spirit. Furthermore, *yu wu zeng jian* (no additions and omissions) seems to be his other criterion for judging the quality of poetic translation. These norms may be more easily attained when the translator uses modern Chinese and free-style verse. But when it comes to using classical Chinese and regulated verse, even Su Manshu himself could not avoid alterations.

Su showed his remarkable translation skill in handling one of the most difficult lines, the first line of the fifth stanza, in which Byron subtly shifted his tenses in describing the famous sea battle of Salamis. The following are the last line of the fourth stanza and the quatrain of the fifth stanza:

```plaintext
And when the sun set where were they [the Persians]?

And where are they? and where art thou,

My country? On thy voiceless shore

The heroic lay is toneless now—

The heroic bosom beats no more!
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(V, 1–4) (my italics)

The change of tenses suddenly draws the story of ancient times into the present, leaving a very strong effect upon the reader. Greeks are not a heroic people any more; they have to endure national subjugation and the humiliation of being a conquered people. Su Manshu, handicapped by the limitations of the Chinese language (strictly speaking, there is little clear tense distinction in the Chinese language), omitted the kind of play on tenses, but still retained the connection between the two stanzas. Here is his translation:

```plaintext
故國不可求
荒涼問水濱
不識烈士歌
勇氣敵如雲
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(The old country is nowhere to be found
Bleakly I ask the shore
The heroic song is not heard
Courage disperses like a cloud)

Following the battle scene of the past, Su’s “the old country is nowhere to be found” also forms a connecting link between the two stanzas. “The old country” refers to the past (ancient Greece) while “no where to be found” indicates the present Greek situation. The effect created by Byron’s original shift of tenses is achieved in Chinese by the simple juxtaposition of the past and present. Compared with the original “Where art thou, / My country?” Su’s first line seems to lack emotional intensity. Still, the sad tone of Byron’s
line is expressed through the word "bleak", which compensates for the weakness of the first line. Su's second two lines are an apt rendition. "The heroic song is not heard" (Su, 3) is an exact equivalent for Byron's lines (V, 2–3) and "disperses like a cloud" (Su, 4) intensifies the atmosphere, which is heroic, solemn, and also tinged with a tone of Byronic despair.

Perhaps the best of Su Manshu's lines are found just where Ma Junwu failed:

Oh! that the present hour would lead
Another despot of the kind!
Such chains as his were sure to bind.

求民如連鎖 [To bind people like a chain]
豈宜民斷絳 [Means there is no danger of them falling apart]

The couplet may seem semantically liberal, but it shows clearly Su Manshu's rich creative imagination in translation. Byron's strong hope for Greece's freedom and independence is forcefully demonstrated and the original metaphor is retained. Suo (chain) in this context has the meaning of both bondage as well as force to unite people.

Hu Shi translated the poem in 1914 when he was a student at Cornell University in America. His English was better than all the other translators discussed in this paper and he was obviously more familiar with English literature, although he himself did not read the whole of Don Juan and, apparently misled by Liang Qichao, mistook it for a "long play". The preface to his translation shows a fairly balanced appraisal of Byron and his position in English literature. Different from other translators, who borrowed Byron's poem to voice their own views, Hu Shi did the translation merely as a literary exercise. Liu Wu-chi (1986) has given a pertinent appraisal of Hu's version, which I will not repeat here. Hu criticized the translations of Ma Junwu and Su Manshu in his preface as having too many errors and being too obscure respectively. But he also borrowed many ideas from both, including mistakes. His version reads fluently and is much easier to understand than Su's. The greatest improvement he made in the translation, however, is the addition of footnotes to explain background, metaphors, and historical allusions. We may assume he had good reference books at his disposal at Cornell.

The poetic form he used, Sao ti (rhyme-prose style of Chu state of the Warring States period) allowed him more freedom in the number of lines per stanza and line length. But, to our disappointment, his version in general is still more liberal than literal. Take the following stanza for example:

From his annotation of this stanza, we know that he understood perfectly the original metaphors and could have rendered his version more compact, but his first line and "ten thousand years" are simply redundant. The last two lines retain most of the original words but he replaced the word "echo" with "start", indicating that Greece is unresponsive to the song coming from the west (England/Byron). Thus the whole meaning is wrong.

With all their weaknesses, these translations must be considered inspired re-creation, because they all read like perfect Chinese poetry. Of the three versions of Ma Junwu, Su Manshu, and Hu Shi, Su's is the most faithful on the verbal level as well as in the general spirit; Ma's work excels in its force and heroic tone; Hu handled his poetic form with ease and the merit of his translation is the simplicity of language. One common failing of all three versions, however, is that they all missed Byron's sarcastic tone. Ma Junwu perhaps did not appreciate such an attitude, so he simply ignored or changed it; Hu Shi was impaired by the style he chose, and as a result, the whole piece becomes too sentimental. As for Su, sarcasm does not seem to have suited his temperament. Yet more importantly, in this early stage, Chinese scholars viewed Byron mainly as a revolutionary poet, and the political message of the poem captured all their attention, and many other elements of the poem simply escaped them.

These Chinese translations, except for a few minor alterations, are basically faithful in terms of meaning. This success relies to a degree on the nature of
Byron's poetry. The difficulties faced by the Chinese translators lie in achieving the formal kind of faithfulness. Modern poetics has stressed the inseparability of form and content in literary works, particularly poetry, in which form and content are one and the same. In discussing translation, however, the dichotomy remains a convenient one. Poetic translation is difficult, some would say impossible. The difficulties lie in the music, rhythm, rhyme, metre, and assonance. Levi-Strauss has said that poetry and myth are at opposite ends of the translation spectrum. The translation of poetry is generally subject to distortions of a kind which kill the original poem, while myth lives on even in the worst translations. These distortions are principally those of form.

'Form' presents the greatest challenge to all translators, especially those dealing with two languages like English and Chinese which are genetically unrelated and rhythmically remote. It was all but impossible for the Chinese translator to adhere to the original metrical rhythm. Obviously none of our translators had the intention of preserving the original form of Byron's poetry, since no ready-made classical Chinese poetic form was available which suited Byron's verse. The forms they adopted in their translations fall within one of the basic forms of verse translation proposed by James S. Holmes: "the analogical".

The effect of the analogical form is to bring the original poem within the native tradition, to 'naturalize' it... It follows that the analogical form is the choice to be expected in a period that is intumcted and exclusive, believing that its own norms provide a valid touchstone by which to test the literature of other places and other times. Periods of this kind tend moreover to have such highly developed genre concepts that any type of form other than the analogical would be quite unacceptable to the prevailing literary tastes. (1970: 97)

The pre-May Fourth China may have been exactly "inturncted and exclusive"; as a matter of fact it was one of the most open and receptive periods in modern Chinese history. But "highly developed genre concepts" still dominated the literary world—even Hu Shi's attempt at new poetry did not come out till several years after his translation.

The early translators all used what they believed to be "analogical" forms. Liang Qichao adopted the pattern of the lyrical songs of Yuan drama to his translation of Byron's "The Isles of Greece"; Ma Junwu used septasyllabic lines with occasional variations; Su Manshu rendered his version entirely in pentasyllabic regulated verse, and Hu Shi adopted the Chu ci style:

his stanzas contain either six or eight lines. As we pointed out earlier, the English poem was originally sung by a wandering singer in Don Juan, and is written in a kind of folk-song style in that it is sung to the accompaniment of a musical instrument; the words are simple and the metre is regular. Each stanza contains six lines in iambic tetrameter, an ababcc rhyming pattern, and in itself a complete thought unit. There are few variations of form throughout the poem. China's poetic tradition dates back thousands of years, and its roots range from the earliest Book of Songs, five-character line gu shi (ancient poems) and fu (rhyme prose) of the Han dynasty, through the seven-character regulated verse of the Tang dynasty, to Song lyrics and the lyrical songs of Yuan drama. But there was no existing classical Chinese poetic form available to translators of Liang Qichao's generation which corresponded to that of Byron's verse. At the beginning of this century, these forms were the ones the translators knew and were well-versed in, and which readers would accept as poetry, so they had to adhere to these strict prosodic formulae. Given these norms, "communicative" rather than "semantic" translation, to borrow Peter Newmark's terms, is inevitable.

Towards the end of Qing dynasty, the scholar poet Huang Zunxian (1848-1905) did try to initiate a poetic reform. His famous slogan was "my hand writes my mouth", that is, he wanted to use such language in poetry as people actually speak. He tested his ideas in his political poems in the form of the five-character ancient poem, using popular language. Huang's style might have been more appropriate for Byron's "The Isles of Greece" because of its simple form and political content. But none of the translators here made any attempt at such a form. First, Huang himself was only experimenting. He aimed at breaking away from the traditional poetry, in his own words, to express "what the ancient people did not have, to explore virgin land". But our translators, though perhaps indeed expressing what the ancient people did not have and exploring virgin land, were trying to emulate traditional arts. They wanted to produce 'authentic' Chinese poetry. Su Manshu did adopt a pentasyllabic verse form, similar to Huang's favourite form, in his translation, but he went in the opposite direction. Instead of simplifying his language, he used many obsolete expressions that even his contemporaries found difficult to understand. Even Liang Qichao who, together with Huang Zunxian, started this literary 'popularization' reform, followed strictly the prosodic formulae of his form.

Liang Qichao used the dramatic form as an "equivalent form"—I put this in inverted commas because "equivalent form" does not exist in Chinese
translation of English poetry—in translating the original song, because he thought Don Juan to be a play. Moreover, there were many ready-made lyrical tunes to choose from Yuan drama which were familiar to readers of the day. The equivalent effect that this form had lies in its popular style, its diction and singability. But it follows a completely different metrical rhythm and rhyme scheme. As Liang made no deliberate attempt to preserve the original structure and wording, his version can at best be called recreation by today’s standards. The following example is his translation of the third stanza, which impressed Hu Shi so much that he almost gave up his own attempt. Byron reads:

The mountains look on Marathon—
And Marathon looks on the sea;
And musing there an hour alone,
I dreamed that Greece might still be free
For standing on the Persian’s grave,
I could not deem myself a slave.  (III)

Liang’s translation is:

後面的山脈，遠遠地
在馬拉松山腳
這樣的山河，值得我們回顧
我站在波斯人的墳墓
我不會認為自己是個奴隸，今生今世

Here every line ends with the same ao sound, which is quite common in Chinese opera. The number of characters—generally a regular ten—to each line, is demanded by the melody of the Chinese lyric. And each line has two breaks separating three sense-groups of three, three, and four syllables respectively. For example, the last line should be chanted as:

不信我替奴隸○替奴隸今世

In the second sense-group, Liang Qichao inserted an extra character as a variation. As the last four syllables are sometimes further divided into two metrical feet, Liang Qichao did manage, after a fashion, to preserve the original rhythm. The parallel structure of the first two lines of the original is creatively rendered as “behind” and “in front of”. This influenced both Ma Junwu and Hu Shi. The repetition in the last two lines would remind anyone familiar with Chinese theatre of modern-day Peking opera lyrics, and marks the clear distinction between qu (lyrical song) and shi (poem).

Though Ma Junwu’s verse is basically regular in terms of the number of syllables per line, the number of lines per stanza varies from six to ten. Seven-character-line verse is a highly sophisticated form which reached its zenith during the Tang dynasty. Ma Junwu’s version, however, is not constrained by its principles of antithesis and rhyme scheme. Preceding the last two lines of each stanza is the Chinese exclamation yu/uehu or “alas”, which lends his stanzas a special cadence. Ma Junwu’s more successful lines not only capture the poem’s original spirit but also preserve the parallel structure. For

In native swords, and native ranks
The only hope of courage dwells  (XIV, 3–4)

For what is left the poet here?
For Greeks a blush—for Greece a tear.  (VI, 5–6)

Ma used Chinese couplets:

[Reliable are only the Greek army]
[Reliable are only Greek swords]

For Greece I frown
For Greece I weep.

In fact, parallel structure is one of the most frequently used devices in Chinese poetry; it poses little problem for the poet-translator to transform such a device from English. Su Manshu adopted the same strategy in translating the second couplet (VI, 5–6):

[For Greeks I feel ashamed for Greeks]
[I weep for Greece]

These parallel lines are not usually found in the highly developed quatrains and regulated verses of the Tang dynasty, but in verses of folk-song nature, such as those in the Book of Songs, the Han ballads, and the Yuan drama,
they are quite common. In this sense, the original folk-song quality is creatively preserved.

Compared with others, Su Manshu’s rendition is the most regular in overall verse pattern and rhyme scheme. He chose the form of pentasyllabic regulated verse for the original song, because it is closer to the Chinese folk song tradition. But since a five-character line can hardly accommodate what is said in the original iambic tetrametre, Su Manshu did not restrict himself to the same number of lines in each stanza as the original. He rendered the six lines of the original English stanza into eight lines of Chinese. By so doing, he allowed himself more flexibility in dealing with the problems of metre and rhyme. Furthermore, an eight-line stanza reads very much like Chinese poetry, because regulated Chinese verse usually has either four or eight lines per stanza.

Su Manshu paid close attention to Byron’s rhetorical devices such as repetition and antithesis. The following are some examples:

The isles of Greece, the isles of Greece! (I, 1)
Chu ci

In vain—in vain; strike other chords (IX, 1)

The hero’s harp, the lover’s lute (I, 2)

Hu Shi’s Chi ci style is reminiscent of Qu Yuan (340–278 B.C.), the tragic patriotic poet of the Warring States period who lamented the fate of his country. His was the unmistakable image that Hu Shi imposed upon the singer in Don Juan, or Byron himself, when he read this poem. This is a typical case where, as Holmes puts it, the translator “looked beyond the original poem itself to the function of its form within its poetic tradition, then sought a form that filled a parallel function within the poetic tradition of the target language” (1970: 95). And in an annotation to the fifth stanza, Hu wrote, “In the second sentence of the original ‘and where art thou, / My country?’ only the Chi ci style can convey the tone in which Byron called to the old country” (1970: 16). Sure enough, this form does intensify the bleak tone in this particular case as well as in many other stanzas. But it is just this Chi ci style that backfires elsewhere in the poem, for it is not a style suitable for Byron’s biting satire in, say, stanza XI. This is, I believe, why Liu Wu-chi (1986: 220) says that Hu’s versions reads too much like grumbling, which is absent in Byron’s original.

All the translators interpreted the original form in terms of their native tradition and thus adopted the rhythm and rhyme schemes of their respective chosen forms. Liang Qichao’s stanzas rhymed aaaaaa throughout, Ma Junwu used several different schemes aababc (IV), aababb (XII), aaxaxbbbbb (XIV), etc., Su Manshu used axaxaxaa (I), axaxaxaa (IV), and so on. All these rhyme schemes are essentially governed by the basic rules of Chinese poetry. And when adopted in translating Byron, the general effect is not too far away from Byron’s original ababcc. The rhyme schemes of typical Chinese quatrains are usually aaxa, or xaxa; in other words, it is of paramount importance that the even-numbered lines (Su’s IV), and sometimes the adjacent lines (Ma’s IV and XII), rhyme, while this is optional for the first and third lines. Let us take a closer look at Byron’s ababcc. Leaving out the concluding couplet, the rhyme scheme would be abab. To the Chinese ear, this is not substantially different from xaxa in that only the rhyming of the even-number lines stands out and that of the odd-number lines is easily neglected, for the Chinese are less sensitive to any resonance between the first and the third lines. Construed this way, the translation’s success as poetry does not rely on the preservation of the original rhyme schemes.

Whereas rhyming can be ‘naturalized’, there are other devices in Byron’s poetry such as alliteration (“Must we but blush?—Our fathers bled” and “We will not think of themes like these”) and internal rhyme (“I dreamed that Greece might still be free”) which simply disappear in all translations, for there are no corresponding devices in the Chinese poetic tradition. They are qualities intrinsic to the English language which Chinese is without, and would hardly have been recognizable in Chinese had they indeed successfully been transmitted. Double and treble rhymes are very rare in Chinese poetry except in the comic doggerel of some dialects. Yet at this stage, no translator tried to present and emphasize a ‘strangeness’ in English poetry to the Chinese reader.

One of the major characteristics of Byron’s important poems is their strong ‘mythical’ quality. He is a great story-teller and his longer poems are usually entertaining stories of themselves. Like Homer, he has the ability to fascinate his readers even in prose. That is why some people say that Byron loses nothing in translation. ‘Content’, that is, Byron’s story, thought, spirit,
satire, sentiment, mood, can be and has been more or less successfully carried across in these Chinese translations.

This is not to say that there are no obstacles to translating the 'content'. Most challenging perhaps are the historical and cultural allusions, the abundance of which is one of the important characteristics of this poem. For instance, the well-known fight at Marathon, the great sea battle at Salamis, the heroic deeds of the three hundred Spartans at Thermopylae who fought against the Persians till all of them died, and the legendary story of Pyrrus who destroyed his enemies, the Romans, with his Phalanx, etc. Some of his allusions are unfamiliar even to English readers. In "The Isles of Greece", behind each of the numerous (altogether thirty-two) proper names is a historical event or legend. The Chinese translators adopted various methods in rendering these particular allusions. Ma Junwu and Su Manshu quite simply imposed these stories on the Chinese reader through transliteration without any explanation whatsoever. As a result, their translations into classical Chinese are obscure and were so even to their contemporaries. Hu Shi provided detailed information in footnotes, but too many of these would be prone to distract the reader. Hu Shi therefore tried to compromise by sinicizing some of the mythological figures. For example, Phoebus (Apollo) and Delos (where Phoebus dwells or, according to a different version of Greek mythology, where both Phoebus and Artemis dwell) (I, 4), are translated using the Chinese "equivalents" Xie 肆和 (the god of the sun) and Su e 素娥 (the goddess of the moon). Though it may strike a Chinese reader as odd that Xihe and Su'e are obscure and were so even to their contemporaries, this never go hand in hand, as can be found in Childe Harold's Pilgrimage and most of his Oriental Tales. In "The Isles of Greece", having recalled the glories of ancient heroes, Byron neglects neither the "Doric mothers" (XIII) nor "each glowing maid" (XV). Su Manshu, whom many of his contemporaries were to call the 'Chinese Byron', read behind the original "Pyrrhic phalanx" and "Pyrrhic dance" Byron's intention to juxtapose them in order to contrast manly bravery with womanish cowardice or traditional national pride and contemporary sensual indulgence. The interpretation is correct, because Byron placed them together not merely in a play on words; he uses the dance as a contrast to the famous battle formation, "The nobler and the manlier one" (4), as did Su Manshu. Hu Shi also had the contrast in mind and more or less represented it in his lines: “陣之堂堂” (powerful battle formation) and "舞之翩翩" (gentle and graceful dance); only the words "gentle and graceful" may not be able to be related to "the thunderbolt dance".

The sinicization approach does not, however, work as well in Su Manshu's rendition of "Samian wine", which appears several times in the poem. Su renders only the surface meaning, devoid of any implied significance, most importantly in the following line:

Fill high the bowl with Samian wine!

Which is repeated four times in the poem. The translation reads:

注滿杯中酒　[Fill high the cup with wine]

The meaning of "Samian wine" requires some attention. "Samian" is derived from the word "Samos", the name of one of the Greek islands abundant in vineyards from which fine wines were made, hence "Samian wine". In Su Manshu's line, "Samian" is left out. Elsewhere, Su substitutes the words linglu 粟漉, the names (Ling and Lu) of two places famous for their wines in

(Incidentally, Pili wu 翔翼舞 (the thunderbolt dance), a well-known dance form of the Tang imperial palace which is immortalized by the famous poet Bai Juyi in his ever-popular Chang hen ge. Compared with the fierce masks and weapons associated with the more masculine thunderbolt dance, the feather dress dance displays feminine grace and beauty. Surely one or other of these diametrically opposed translations is to be preferred. Curiously enough, however, both are correct in their own ways. Ma Junwu and Hu Shi were correct in that the thunderbolt dance is a kind of war-dance as is the Pyrrhic dance. With Ma's version before him, Su Manshu could hardly have misunderstood the original. But he knew Byron better and saw deeper. With Byron, for various purposes heroes and beautiful ladies so often go hand in hand, as can be found in Childe Harold's Pilgrimage and most of his Oriental Tales. In "The Isles of Greece", having recalled the glories of ancient heroes, Byron neglects neither the "Doric mothers" (XIII) nor "each glowing maid" (XV). Su Manshu, whom many of his contemporaries were to call the 'Chinese Byron', read behind the original "Pyrrhic phalanx" and "Pyrrhic dance" Byron's intention to juxtapose them in order to contrast manly bravery with womanish cowardice or traditional national pride and contemporary sensual indulgence. The interpretation is correct, because Byron placed them together not merely in a play on words; he uses the dance as a contrast to the famous battle formation, "The nobler and the manlier one" (4), as did Su Manshu. Hu Shi also had the contrast in mind and more or less represented it in his lines: “陣之堂堂” (powerful battle formation) and "舞之翩翩" (gentle and graceful dance); only the words "gentle and graceful" may not be able to be related to "the thunderbolt dance".

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ancient China. Although this may be a case of over-sinicization, perhaps it does indeed contain much of Byron's intended meaning: to warn the Greeks against indulging themselves in luxury while their country was under foreign rule. But there is, perhaps, a greater depth to Byron's reference to "Samian wine". In a sea battle between the Greeks and Persians in 494 B.C., Greece suffered heavy losses as a result of the navies of the Aegean islands of Samos and Lesbos turning traitor. The last line of the poem would then have much greater significance and force:

Dash down yon cup of Samian wine! (XVI, 6)

Here Su Manshu transliterated "Samian":

碎敘瓷明杯 [Break the Suoming (Samian) cup]

The translation conveys only the determination to abandon the leisurely and luxurious living associated with wine-toping, but sacrificing the analogy between the "wine" and treachery, for *suoming* here to Chinese readers would sound like a specific kind of cup. Some later translators did explain the origin of "Samian wine", but they all missed the analogy.

Turning to Byron's final stanza, the first four lines read:

Place me on Sunium's marbled steep,
Where nothing, save the waves and I,
May hear our mutual murmurs sweep;
There, swan-like, let me sing and die. (XVI, 1–4)

In some translations of "Sunium" and "swan", the former is short-changed while the latter is over-killed.

On "Sunium's marbled steep" stands the temple to Athena, the protectress of Athens. Byron's wish to be placed on Sunium's marbled steep and die there is significant in two ways. Firstly he called upon the Greeks to take up arms in defence of their country and to die as its "guardians"; secondly, and very Byronically, he likened himself to Greece's protector. In fact he did die—however ineffectively—for the sake of her independence. In all Chinese translations, including the later ones, "Sunium" is merely transcribed. Any further Byronic significance is lost.

In Western culture, the swan is generally believed to sing only once, before it dies, hence the expression 'swan-song'. But no translators, not even the later ones, have elaborated with a footnote. As for the significance of "swan" there is no Chinese equivalent. The following are Ma Junwu's, Su Manshu's and Hu Shi's respective translations of the line:

There, swan-like, let me sing and die (XVI, 4):

一曲既終從此死 [When my song is finished I will die] (Ma)
願為摩天鵰 [I wish I were a sky-scraping swan-goose] (Hu)
至死鳴且飛 [Till death I would sing and fly] (Su)

As Su Manshu constantly identified himself with Byron and associated the swan's singer with Byron himself, who evidently had lofty aspirations to restore Greece's independence and acted heroically before his death. Considered this way, the line *hi si ming qie lei* (Before I die, let me sing and fly) becomes a vivid portrayal of Byron in Greece, or perhaps a description of the great aspiration of Su Manshu himself. Furthermore, "swan song" does not evoke associations with poets in the minds of Chinese readers the way it does in Western readers.

"Swan-goose song", however, has another connotation in Chinese literature. Swan-goose were regarded as homeless birds in ancient China; their sorrowful songs reminded migrant people (usually soldiers and corvée labourers) of the misery of their displacement. A poem about this was collected in The Book of Songs. As Su Manshu constantly identified himself with Byron as a drifting poet, it seems in all likelihood that he had Byron's—as well as his own—situation in mind when he translated the poem. His intended Chinese readers, he knew, would have been familiar with the Chinese classics. Thus, what is tragic in the original has become melodramatic in translation.

Hu Shi was misled by Su Manshu in translating "swan" as *honghu*, and
his xiaoyao 漂逸 (free and leisurely) is nowhere to be found in the original. He probably inserted the word for the sake of lyrical rhythm, but in that it is associated with another legendary bird, the kunpeng found in Zhuangzi, it reveals a different picture of Byron in Hu’s mind: he probably saw the English bard as a carefree romantic poet like Li Bai of the Tang dynasty. Ma Junwu, on the other hand, left out the image of the bird completely. A literal back translation of his line would be "When my song is finished, I shall die." Though unfaithful semantically, his version, ironically, appears to be the most faithful and communicative, for it conveys the original tragic force.

These early translators introduced “The Isles of Greece” to China, to a great extent, out of political considerations. They intended to borrow this new image of Byron to awaken the Chinese people’s love for freedom and justice, to encourage the oppressed to overthrow their feudal rulers. “The Isles of Greece” expresses a kind of patriotic spirit and rebellion that the passive resistance of the traditional Chinese poet could never reach. Above all, Byron had a special appeal for the Chinese translators primarily because of his sacrifice for the cause of national independence. Liang Qichao found in Byron the political reformer he needed to promote his political principles and ideas. Ma Junwu borrowed the image of Byron to “lament the fate of his country”: Su Manshu voiced his personal feelings and sentiment in the translation. They all expected certain principles and ideas in their respective translations through their admirable art of translation as well as their misreading and genuine misunderstanding of Byron’s poem.

Notes

1. Liu Wu-chi (1986: 196-264) has given a fairly detailed study of these translations in his "Su Manshu yu Bailun ‘Ai Xila shi’ " (Su Manshu and Byron’s "The Isles of Greece").
2. The Story of New China was first published in Xin xiaoshuo (New fiction), Nos 1, 2, and 3, 1902. Byron’s poems appear in No. 3, pp. 42-47. Liang’s novel is discussed in detail by Wong Wang-chi in this volume.
3. Harold Spender uses this expression in his Byron and Greece (London: John Murray, 1924), p. 3.
4. The magazine is no longer extant. His translation is collected in Tan Hang 1987: 141-144.
6. Wang Duqing thought that Hu Shi’s translation was better than Ma’s and Su’s, and he could even recite Hu’s version from memory. Inspired by Hu’s translation, Wang Duqing translated a passage from The Giaour when he was in France (1922) in the Chu ci style which Hu Shi used in his version.
7. Su’s translation had been polished by Zhang Taiyan, who liked to use rare and archaic words.
8. Su also chose this form in his translation of “My Native Land, Good Night” from Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage.
9. Hu Shi’s version has no regular rhyme and metre.
10. This substitution occurs in a line added by Su Manshu himself. Ma Junwu transliterated “Samian” as Shaming, while Hu Shi did not translate it at all: he simply used “good wine” for “Samian wine”.

References


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