

Translation and the Canon of Greek Tragedy in Chinese Literature

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Abstract: In their article "Translation and the Canon of Greek Tragedy in Chinese Literature" Rongnü Chen and Lingling Zhao discuss when and how ancient Greek drama were introduced and merged into Chinese literature. Since Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* was first translated into Chinese and published in 1932 up to now, it has been translated eight times in China from 1932 to 2013. Starting from the Chinese translations and reception of *Prometheus Bound*, Chen and Zhao explore why so many translators have chosen to translate it in the past eighty years. Chen and Zhao also discuss how these translating activities advanced the construction of modern Chinese literature.

Rongnü CHEN and Lingling ZHAO

Translation and the Canon of Greek Tragedy in Chinese Literature

From the late Qing dynasty to the May Fourth period, Western literature as a whole, regarded as progressive and modern, was introduced into China in many forms. The world of theater was no exception. In the 1920s, many Western plays had been translated and introduced into Chinese theater (see Tian 119) and with that came a debate on new and traditional drama (see Hu 376-86). Thereafter, Western drama instead of traditional Chinese drama and opera became prominent in Chinese literature and performance and 话剧 (*hua ju*; "modern play/drama") was coined as a new term. The earliest translation of ancient Greek tragedies can be traced to 周作人 (Zuoren Zhou) who translated a part of Euripides's *The Trojan Women* based on its English version translated by Gilbert Murray. In 1924 the drama was published with the translator's comments in *小说月报* (*Fiction Monthly*). Zhou had commented that the play "is the initial embodiment that European literature paid emphasis on the human spirit" (9; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by Chen and Zhao). In 1926 杨晦 (Hui Yang) translated Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* and after a separate edition was published in 1932, the text initiated the wholesale translation and publication of ancient Greek tragedies. Important to note is that Greek tragedies were introduced to Chinese scholarship and readership via translations from other than the original ancient Greek. By 2014 thirty-two Greek tragedies have Chinese versions and some of them with several versions. For example, *Prometheus Bound* has eight translated versions so far.

When Yang conducted his translation of *Prometheus Bound* into Chinese for the first time in 1926, the source text Yang chose was the English edition translated by Lewis Campbell. At the same time Yang referred to John Stuart Blackie's and Robert Potter's earlier versions of the play. As Yang said, their English translation was in verse and he chose to translate the text to verse as well, but later he believed that "the most suitable way would be translating verse to prose with poetic taste" ("Introduction" 9) and subsequently Yang transformed his Chinese translation to prose according to Herbert Smyth's English prose version. Yang's *被幽囚的普罗密修士* (*Prometheus Bound*) was the first complete attempt to translate ancient Greek tragedies to Chinese. After Yang's first Chinese translation, 罗念生 (Niansheng Luo) finished in 1939 (published in 1947) the second Chinese translation of the play from the original Greek and he translated also notes and annotations by J.E. Harry, E.E. Sikes, and J.B. Wynne Willson. Luo's translation was extensive because his translation included a prologue by himself as the translator, a translation in its abridged form of an introduction written by Harry, the main text of the play, and 141 annotations and four appendices. It can be said that Luo's translation was a landmark event in the introduction of not only Greek tragedy, but Western literature to the Chinese canon of literature. Following Luo's translation there have been further six translations of *Prometheus Bound* including a popularizing version translated from English by the playwright 李健吾 (Jianwu Li) and some research-oriented versions translated from the original Greek by 陈中梅 (Zhongmei Chen). It is important to note again that what Chinese translators favored were English versions published in the Loeb Classical Library series. A significant achievement is the 2007 eight-volume *古希腊悲剧喜剧全集* (Complete Works of Ancient Greek Tragedies and Comedies) translated by 张竹明 (Zhuming Zhang) and 王焕生 (Huansheng Wang) and the text won the 2nd prize of China's government sponsored publishing book award in 2011. The first volume of the series includes tragedies by Aeschylus including *Prometheus Bound*. Except four tragedies translated by Hui Yang, Jianwu Li, Zhiheng Zhang (张焜恒), and Chaoyang Gao (高朝阳) from English versions, the rest of the texts were translated from the Greek with reference to English versions at the same time.

From the perspective of contemporary translation studies, translation can enhance the innovation and development of literary history (see, e.g., Even-Zohar). This was definitely true for Chinese literature between 1920s and 1930s, when Yang translated ancient Greek tragedy for the first time. Two kinds of motivations formed his translation, namely literary and practical considerations. First, motivation in terms of literary style was to introduce the genre of ancient, classical tragedy of the West into the canon of Chinese literature. This objective not only involved the goal of establishing and shaping Western tragedy in the context of Chinese literature in the debate on new and traditional drama to remove influences of traditional Chinese operas, but also the merging between imported Western literary canons and modern Chinese literature after the May Fourth Movement (1915-1921). Second,

Yang's practical motivation in his translation was to capitalize on the notion of Prometheus's spirit to contextualize the dark realities of China at the time. He held his hope that figures like Prometheus and the ideas it suggests would "shine upon our wretched and filthy world" (Yang, "Appendix" 81). Further, Yang's translation related to specific questions such as "how to translate," "what to translate," and so on. The painstaking efforts of Yang was proof that his Chinese translation was the consequence of prudent choice instead of a young man's casual impulsiveness and haste. His choice of the original verse format implies that he was fully aware and supported the notion to "import" Western literature to Chinese literature thus to develop the canon of Chinese literature. Yang admitted that he weighed between the verse text and the prose text, so the translating manuscript was revised again and again out of the main consideration of "how to translate" and hence his later version in prose. In addition, Yang, as a playwright, viewed and performed his Chinese translation of a Greek tragedy in the motivation that the translated foreign text should be localized and could be displayed on the stage.

In the 1940s, Yang concluded his opinions on the translation of drama when he wrote about his translation of Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* as follows: "The highest standard of drama translation, I believe, is that these dramas can be performed in China's stage just like the composition of Chinese writers, not necessarily adapted...it doesn't make much sense that some translators completely comply with the original text. For instance, the original prose version is translated in the form of prose, without any line divisions, or the verse version is translated in Chinese verse version by such translators" (Yang, "Why Should" 102-03). Further, Yang made a clear choice when it came to "what to translate." It was in the period of 沉钟社 (Sunken Bell Society 1925-34) when Yang translated *Prometheus Bound*. During that time, he composed many one-act plays, five of which were published the Society's journal, one of them entitled 除夕 (Old Year's Day) in 1926 (these five one-act plays were published in book form in 1929). It is interesting to note that Yang was keen on quoting some passages from literary canons as an inscription in front of the book and each play. Two of these quotations were from English translations of Aeschylus's and Sophocles's texts. We are able to find some clues from these examples that Yang had been convinced about and filled with admiration for ancient Greek tragedies and Shakespeare's works as the essence of Western drama. Yang also translated Henry Morley's 1886 "Ancient Greek Tragedian Aeschylus" and placed it in the front of his translation. It is also relevant that while Yang's motivation to introduce Greek drama to the Chinese was innovative, it nevertheless was not regarded positively at the time. After the introduction of Morley's views, Yang presented his own standpoint on how to define Aeschylus's value: "There are some masterpieces in modern dramas. While contrasting them with those of ancient Greek or Shakespeare in England, we inevitably feel the gap is like mountains compared with mound, 'the life in mountains lives longer than that alongside puddles.' But we are not supposed to wallow in the mud only because the mountain is too high" (Yang, "Introduction" 8).

Yang's judgment on Aeschylus's literary value was apparently made in the frame of comparing traditional with modern Western drama. In the 1920s, Chinese literary and artistic circles were interested in modern realistic drama and the "problem play" (see Chen and Dong). Yang, on the contrary, did not consider modern drama as important as ancient Greek tragedies or Shakespeare's dramas. He really had a remarkable and exceptional insight to discern what others did not have and acted on the opposite way. Yang's views were filled with strong emotional investment, rather than academic conclusions which drew scholars. As a young playwright and witness of Chinese literary modernity, he was firmly on the side of eulogizing the past in taking and following Western drama by marking the authority of Greek tragedy. As far as Chinese literature is concerned, the characteristics of Greek tragedy represented the West to him. It is possible and feasible that the uniqueness of Greek literature provides its Chinese readership including scholars and including translators "a perspective of detachment and differentiation to keep some distance with Chinese literary modernization in a reflective and critical way" (Du 100-01).

When discussing problems of drama, we cannot separate ourselves from the background of the debate on new and traditional drama at the time of the early twentieth century in China. In a sense, it was the question of what directions and forms, new or traditional, Chinese drama developed and it was the question of the refraction of modernity that Chinese literature has encountered since the May Fourth Movement. Yang's translation and composition started up in such a grand and spectacular tide of domestic drama reformation and the introduction Western canons of literature. Yang wrote about

his perceptions of drama in an essay entitled "并非戏剧的时代" ("An Era") in 1933. In terms of the Chinese traditional operas, Yang did not think highly of Yuan drama including 杂剧 (*zaju*) and 散曲 (*sanqu*) and viewed them superficial; however Yang's interest was more on national character instead of problematics of drama and he drew some startling and striking conclusions like "we don't have drama spirit in our nationality" and "we are in an era not belonging to drama" (Yang, "An Era" 43). What he wanted to express was the disappointment that drama would improve Chinese nationality. As an author living in the May Fourth period, Yang's attitude revealed typical contradictions intellectuals at the time encountered with regard to Chinese literature and foreign literature: traditional Chinese literature was doomed to decline; however, the course of modern transformation of Chinese literature joined with foreign literature was still long and unpredictable. Even Yang, who extolled Western classical drama and composed drama by himself, the characteristics of Greek tragedy did not appear in his own texts. This situation lasted for a period until the publication of 雷雨 (*Thunderstorm*) by 曹禺 (*Yu Cao*) in 1934, a new type of play opposite to traditional opera and that revealed some of the content and characteristics of Western drama (see Chen 1062-63).

Yang's friend 冯至 (*Zhi Feng*) wrote that "Hui Yang often spoke highly of Prometheus in Greek myth and Job in Hebrew legend" (5) and Yang wrote about Prometheus and Job in his correspondence with his friend 陈翔鹤 (*Xianghe Chen*) in 1926: "I just hope you will be strong by yourself! I hope we all become strong meanwhile! I am counting on this strength and power when I am doing some work on Prometheus and Job" (Yang, *Selected Letters* 50). Born in a poor peasant family in the northeast of China, Yang was endowed with a spirit of an ascetic monk confronting the darkness of reality boldly. He was a teacher of Chinese literature in Kongde School in Peking (Beijing), while he read European dramas. Under such circumstances, Feng, who was a disciple of Yang, acquired much knowledge of Western drama (Feng 2). What Yang appreciated was actually the great personalities of Prometheus and Job: Prometheus's rebellion against Zeus, the god-king, and Job's endurance of hardship. This kind of preference was not just simple personal literary taste, but the appeal for assuming the task of national rejuvenation. As Yang put it himself, what he intended was to facilitate ending of the age of non-democracy with Prometheus's spirit of sacrificing his own life for the sake of other humans (*Literature and Democracy* 214).

Yang wrote an appendix entitled "Prometheus" for his translation of *Prometheus Bound*. It was a masterpiece written between December 1926 and January 1927 (see Yang, *Selected Letters* 52). We can find strong feelings in his expressions and there were a large number of parallel sentences and paragraphs startling exclamations everywhere in the essay, for example "Oh! Great Prometheus! You are our soldier. You are the savior of human beings! Your merits and virtues lie in your sacrifice! Your accomplishments rest in your perseverance! Your flesh is our spiritual food. Your blood is our wine" (80). Yang called Prometheus "you" or "our Prometheus" where the narrator and Prometheus were in perfect harmony and we can feel Yang's identification and admiration to Prometheus's great merits and virtues. His appeal for the reappearance of Prometheus's spirit was not just because, as he said in the "Introduction," he "set an initial and highest model of sacrifice for the sake of human beings" (8-9), but because "this world" was "the world that was pervaded by darkness" and Yang expected that some precious outstanding personalities could be cultivated even in such a dark world (2, 5). In his conclusion Yang expected that more Prometheus-type great minds would emerge in the dark and decaying China.

As mentioned previously, Luo's translation of *Prometheus Bound*—translated in 1939 and published in 1947—was the second Chinese translation of the Greek play. Luo was the first Chinese who studied in Greece and he received training in Western classical studies first in U.S. and then in Greece. He had undertaken numerous translations of literature and philosophy from ancient Greek to Chinese. In terms of the translation of ancient Greek literature, Luo's first translation was Euripides's *Iphigenia in Tauris* in 1933 and he translated a total of sixteen Greek tragedies in his life. He had strong feelings about the necessity of translating canonical literature and thus he did not limit himself to a single writer's works, but translated acknowledged masterpieces. Luo's most direct and plain motive to translate *Prometheus Bound* was based on his belief that there would be a need to have another translation of the text in addition to that of Yang's. It is important to note that in the history of Chinese translation of Greek tragedy, he was the first Chinese translator who translated Greek tragedies from the original. Compared with Yang, Luo translated drama as a scholar instead of a playwright and what he valued

was accuracy and his translation is still considered valuable today. First, in selection of the source text, Luo chose J.E. Harry's revised version for the reason that its annotations were detailed and thorough (Luo, Corpus 2, 203). While translators usually dealt just with the body text, at most they would give a few common-sense notes to some proper names of people and places, Luo's translation went beyond this. Some notes of his version explained the drama, the knowledge of Greek mythology and there were some analyses of the significance of tragic verses and some comparisons among different editions in his annotations as well.

Besides choosing which text to translate with explanatory annotations and appendices as mentioned above, Luo wrote that his translations pursued faithfulness to the original work for the purpose of keeping some "exotic taste" (The Painstaking 376). The insistence on "faithfulness" was a significant consideration for Luo to translate Greek literature, but his "foreignized" translation resulted in an "exotic" Chinese and this appeared strange to readers and because of this Luo's translations were criticized. Luo once wrote, implicitly, about the criticism of his translation: some people compared his version with Jianwu Li's version on *Prometheus Bound* and they held the view that Li's translation was understood easily once people read it while Luo's version could not be understood until readers digested it for quite a while (The Painstaking 376). Such criticism implied that Luo's translation was unsuitable for the Chinese way of thinking and linguistic ways. However, as said previously, Li's version was translated from English and Li was a playwright and thus what he emphasized and pursued was the smoothness of text instead of faithfulness to the original text. Nonetheless, Luo's *Prometheus Bound* had great significance in China and while his translation could not be defined as "perfect," we submit that the translations published in the 1930s and 1940s have yet to be surpassed. Interestingly and supporting our claim is that in 1939 Luo wrote a preface for his *Prometheus Bound* translation and in 1942 he added a supplement of three lines when the book was typeset again. It is from these additions that we know about the problems he encountered when the book was translated and published, specifically about the problems caused by Japanese occupation and the concurrent difficult times for the Chinese and for Luo himself. Luo's passion must be understood in the context of the war that caused the Chinese to develop a fighting spirit and hence Prometheus was the right figure for the political situation. However, in Luo's *Prometheus Bound* among the corpus of texts he translated, his motivation did not include attention to the political situation. Compared with Yang's translation, the influence of circumstances at the time and the appeal for modernity in Chinese literature occupied a small factor in Luo's translation.

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