

Su Manshu's English Proficiency Reexamined

Ivan Yung-chieh Chiang

In the history of translation in China, Su Manshu has been acclaimed as a rare language genius, proficient in Chinese, English, Japanese, French, and Sanskrit. However, this view of him seems to have been passed down from one biographer to another too easily, and needs to be looked at more closely. This paper seeks to judge how proficient Su actually was in English by examining his performance in his two most representative English-related works. The first is *The Miserable World*, which was published separately in 1904 after being serialized in *The China National Gazette* in 1903. Translated from an English version of Hugo's *Les Misérables*, this work can be used to evaluate Su's English comprehension. The other is an English preface written in 1909 for the anthology *Voices of the Tide*, a collection of some Chinese and English literary works both in the original and in translation. While the "Preface to *Voices of the Tide*" is superbly written, displaying an exquisite literary style that demonstrates a native speaker's profound grasp of the English language, *The Miserable World* features numerous misinterpretations that are attributable to the translator's failure to understand some basic English concepts. In order to make sense out of this contradiction, this paper looks at both Su's English learning career and the nature of his translation errors, and concludes that the highly fluent text of the Preface may probably have been polished by a native speaker of English. Finally, this paper concludes that Su had not fully mastered the English language: to handle the basic plot of an English novel might well have been within his power, but to give a more nuanced translation would have required a comprehension and linguistic skill that were beyond him. However, the purpose of this paper is not to deny Su's English ability but rather to clarify the less-than-accurate, exaggerated descriptions of his English proficiency in current biographies.

Keywords: Su Manshu, *Les Misérables*, *The Miserable World*, Preface to *Voices of the Tide*, English proficiency

Received: August 31, 2017

Revised: January 28, 2018, March 1, 2018, June 15, 2018

Accepted: June 27, 2018

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蘇曼殊英文能力之再議

強勇傑

在中國翻譯史上，蘇曼殊向來被視為當代罕見的語言天才，有關蘇氏的傳記中常提及蘇氏精通中、英、日、法、梵五種語言，但這種說法似乎是互相流傳所形成的結果，其背後的根據有待進一步釐清。本論文以蘇氏的英文能力為研究重點，檢視蘇氏涉及英文的文本來判斷蘇氏的英文能力。經篩選而得二部較能顯示蘇氏英文能力的關鍵作品：其一為1903年連載於國民日日報、1904年單行出版的《慘世界》，該作品係根據雨果(V. M. Hugo)小說《悲慘世界》(*Les Misérables*)的英譯本所譯成，可用於檢視蘇氏的英文閱讀理解力；其二為1909年的〈潮音自序〉，該作品係蘇氏為其英漢文學與翻譯選集《潮音》而寫的英文序言，可用於檢視蘇氏的英文寫作能力。研究結果發現矛盾的現象：從〈潮音自序〉流暢自然且深奧的英文表達，顯見作者的英文能力幾無異於受過良好教育的母語人士，但從《慘世界》中譯裡所見到的諸多理解錯誤，又指向蘇氏的英文能力有不少基本問題。本論文試圖解釋這種矛盾現象，從蘇氏學習英文的經歷，佐以誤譯問題的分析，提出英文文筆流暢的〈潮音自序〉係由母語人士潤飾過的可能性，最後歸納出蘇曼殊的英文程度應未達傳記所述的精通程度：蘇氏的英文程度，讀懂英文小說的大意與劇情或許尚可，但更細緻的語言掌握，就可能力有未逮。不過，本研究無意否定蘇氏的英文素養，重點僅在澄清蘇氏的英文能力，指出傳記中有關蘇氏英文能力誇大的陳述。

關鍵詞：蘇曼殊、《悲慘世界》、《慘世界》、《潮音》自序、英文能力

收件：2017年8月31日

修改：2018年1月28日、2018年3月1日、2018年6月15日

接受：2018年6月27日

Introduction

In the history of translation in China, Su Manshu (蘇曼殊) has been known for his multilingualism. Many biographies on Su state that he was good at Chinese, English, Japanese, French, and Sanskrit. While his knowledge of the five languages is beyond doubt, the degree of his proficiency in them calls for further scrutiny. Take his English ability for example. Liu Yazhi (柳亞子) stated that Su Manshu mastered English (Liu, 1987, p. 345). Since Liu was a close friend of Su Manshu's and the most important contributor to the first compilation of Su's complete works, his statement has been taken very seriously. Following Liu, similar descriptions about Su's mastery of English abounded, including those made by Hu Yunyu (胡韞玉) and Zhang Binglin (章炳麟) (Hu, 1985, p. 79; Zhang, 1985, p. 134). Su's excellent command of English has almost become an established fact in studies on Su. However, this piece of information seems to have been passed down from one critic to another, and no one has raised any doubt about its truthfulness.

A perusal of Su's biographies shows that Su's career of learning English was actually quite short. Beginning at the age of 12,¹ he took English lessons from the Spanish scholar Zhuang-xiang (莊湘) from 1896 to 1897 in Shanghai, China (Li, 1993, p. 546). His English education was discontinued as he entered Datong School (大同學校) in Yokohama, Japan, in 1898, when he was placed in the regular, level-B class where English was not taught (Li, 1993, pp. 49-50). Only when he was promoted in 1900 to the level-A section of the school, where English was part of the curriculum, did he resume his English learning,

¹ Throughout this paper, Su Manshu's age is counted in our modern sense, which makes him 12 years old in 1896 (he was born in 1884), as opposed to the ancient Chinese way of counting age, adopted by most biographies on Su Manshu, which makes him one year old as soon as he was born.

which lasted two years until his graduation in 1902 (Li, 1993, pp. 58, 546). Then, he continued to learn English as he spent a year in the special program for Chinese students at Waseda University (早稻田大學) (Li, 1993, pp. 64, 546). After that, there have been no records of his continued English training ever since. In a word, Su received English education for a total of only four or five years. Since English was not Su's mother tongue, and since he was a rather late beginner in learning the language, one cannot help but wonder whether he was really able to master a foreign language, especially one that is vastly diverse from his native language. This paper seeks to answer the question about Su's English ability by searching for clues in his works. Exploring into those of Su's works that were based on his English skills enables the present study to see how Su performed in terms of English skills so that judgment can be made about the extent to which he grasped English.

In evaluating Su Manshu's English proficiency, it is necessary to first define what is meant by "English proficiency" here. Adopting the common categorization of the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, the present paper focuses on Su's reading and writing capabilities only, the main reason being that in Su's time reading and writing were given much more weight than listening and speaking and one's linguistic abilities were manifested primarily in one's writings. Thus, it is in terms of his reading and writing skills that I talk about Su's English proficiency throughout this paper.

In what follows, a preliminary screening will be made to single out Su's texts that can represent his English ability. Then, a close reading and analysis will be conducted to determine Su's performance.

Preliminary Screening: Texts Used for Evaluation

Su's level of English proficiency can be judged by examining his

performance in his English-related works, i.e., his creative English compositions and English-to-Chinese or Chinese-to-English translations. Some delimitations should be made on the selection of works to be further studied. In terms of translation, the present study focuses on Su's prose translation only. Two important reasons serve to account for my exclusion of poetry translation from subsequent scrutiny. The first one is due to my doubt about its representativeness of Su's command of English. To illustrate, rendition of verse is generally known to involve a transformation far more complicated than rendition of prose, and translatability of poetry is often in dispute in the realm of translation studies. It comes as no surprise that many translators of poetry could only select for rendition the works or passages which were within their grasp, excluding those unintelligible or untranslatable to them. Yu Kwang-chung (余光中), for example, admitted that the difficulty or untranslatability of some English poems had prevented him from systematically introducing Western poets to Chinese readers through translation (Yu, 1968, p. 39). In Su's lifetime, he produced 106 creative poems² but only eleven short translated poems, of which four were found to be done by other hands.³ The discrepancy in number between Su's creative poems and translated ones may also suggest that in translating foreign poems he probably could only choose the passages he could handle, resulting in his low production of less than 10 pieces of translated poetry. It is doubtful whether the few selected short translated pieces could reveal the translator's actual linguistic competence.

By contrast, prose translation, especially translation of novel, is usually

² Some of Su's poems are part of a poetic set bearing one title. If counted by titles, there are 53 altogether.

³ Of the six translated poems in *Selected Poems of Byron*, some critics argue that the three Chinese versions of Byron's "The Ocean," "The Isles of Greece," and "Adieu, Adieu! My Native Shore" are in fact translated by Huang Kan (黄侃) rather than by Su Manshu (Huang, 1985; Pan, 1972; Zhong & Su, 1994), and Liu W. further points out that the Chinese rendition of "Maid of Athens" is also done by Huang Kan (Liu, 1972, p. 57).

longer than and not as highly selective as poetry translation. It is true that a translator's decision itself to translate a work involves a process of selection, but in actual translating, the translator is confined by the necessity to represent the story and so is left with not so much freedom to omit important plot segments or details at will. Consequently, the translator cannot pass major passages untreated, and so prose translation is more informing than verse translation in shedding light on a translator's language capability.

My second reason for excluding verse translation has to do with the dilemma faced by poetry translators. Far removed from prosaic language, poetic language is rhythmic, musical, condensed, connotational, and associative. Form and content are equally important in a verse piece, but are often achieved at the expense of each other in translation. Sometimes, rhythmic and other aesthetic considerations outweigh the transference of messages, resulting in the difficulty, or even impossibility, of judging the translator's grasp of the original sense, not to mention the fact that poetic language is quite often opaque and open to interpretation, a phenomenon that makes it hard to distinguish between misconstruction and interpretation on the translator's part. In Su's case, a comparative study on the texts involved also shows many deviations in his translations from the originals, but it is hard to decide whether the deviations were intentional for specifically poetic purposes or indicative of the translator's incompetence. Take his translation of "A Red, Red Rose" by Robert Burns for example. The English poem is an expression of the speaker's everlasting love for someone. The original lines "O my Luve's like the melodie / That's sweetly play'd in tune" is rendered as "惻惻清商曲，眇音何遠姚" (Burns, 1794/1976, pp. 94-95). One wonders why the translator turned the pleasant tune in the original into a sad melody in the translation. Also, the source text "I will luv thee still, my dear, / While the sands o' life shall run" finds its counterpart lines "微命屬如縷，相愛無絕期" (Burns, 1794/1976,

pp. 94-95) in the Chinese translation. Here “the sands o’ life shall run” in the original, which is a figurative way of saying “as long as I live” or “as long as time continues,” underscores a long duration of time, but the corresponding rendition “微命屬如縷” shifts the emphasis to how fragile or insignificant the speaker’s life is. In the above two instances of infidelity, it would be too hasty a conclusion to say that the translator misread the originals, as there might be considerations of poetics on the translator’s part; but then, to argue that the renditions do justice to the originals would also be too subjective to be convincing, as poetic considerations in translation do not presuppose the translator’s correct understanding of the original. Here it is difficult to determine whether the unfaithful renditions were done purposely by the translator to achieve certain poetic effects or were simply due to the translator’s failure to grasp the original meanings. Therefore, the present study deems it necessary to leave out poetry translation and use Su’s prose translation, as well as his creative English works, as my focus of study.

Besides leaving out poetry translations, we have other exclusions to make. Some translations in Su’s collections are authored by other writers, so we may rule out “Expositions of the Mahayana Faith” (大乘起信論真如門)⁴ (Ashvagoshā, 1907, p. 4) and “A Reply to Su Wu” (李陵答蘇武書) (Minford & Lao, 2001, p. 582). Some works are professed to be translations but later proven to be creations, so we may ignore *An Account of My Refugee Life on the Seashores of Sala* (婆羅海濱遁跡記) (Ding, 2009). Moreover, *The Swallow’s Letter* (英譯燕子牋) has been lost, so it is also excluded.

After the above screenings, the present paper selects Su’s two representative works for subsequent scrutiny: *The Miserable World* (慘世界) and “Preface to *Voices of the Tide*” (潮音自序) (hereafter the Preface). As Su’s best known prose translation, *The Miserable World* was serialized incompletely in

⁴ Translated in to Chinese by Paramartha (真諦).

1903 in *The China National Gazette* (國民日日報) and then published in 1904 as an offprint which finalized the translation by adding three chapters to the incomplete serials. Here in this paper the 1904 completed reprint is adopted for study. The fourteen-chaptered translation contains some 48,500 Chinese characters, but about two-thirds of the story is concocted by Su and so is irrelevant to the present study. Still, the translated part, consisting of roughly 15,000 characters in all, provides us with sufficient material for inspection. Translated from an English version,⁵ *The Miserable World* can be used to evaluate the translator's English reading comprehension. As for the Preface, this piece was written in 1909 for the anthology *Voices of the Tide* (潮音), a collection of some Chinese and English literary works in originals and translations. Containing about 400 words, it is an important piece of Su's creative writing in English and serves to demonstrate his English writing skill. In what follows, the two significant works will be discussed in terms of the respective skill they reveal.

Su Manshu's English Comprehension Demonstrated in *The Miserable World*

Su Manshu's reading capability can be seen from his performance in translating *Les Misérables*. A preliminary note is to be made first. We know that Su's Chinese *Les Misérables* is half-translation, half-creation, containing many deliberate alterations. One may doubt the possibility of judging Su's reading comprehension from his infidelity to the source. Here some clarifications

⁵ The source text from which Su Manshu's *The Miserable World* was translated had been speculated differently by critics based on the biographical, historical or linguistic information of Su. Chiang (2015) went a step further by comparing the Chinese text with possible Japanese, English and French ones to sort out their relationships and came to the conclusion that Su's Chinese version was translated from an English text, most probably from Charles E. Wilbour's translation.

are necessary. Of the 14 chapters in Su's *The Miserable World*, about one third are translation, the remaining being the translator's invention. My textual comparison is targeted only on the translation part, where my survey finds that except for some minor modifications, Su Manshu generally follows the original narration rather closely, sometimes translating almost sentence by sentence. The nearly close translation provides ample clues for us to know how the translator understood the original. Therefore, focusing on the part where Su adheres to the original story, I am able to discern some discrepancies that manifestly arise from Su's misreading.

A detailed examination shows that there are quite a few peculiar errors which are obviously attributable to the misunderstandings on the translator's part. Since the translation mistakes are too numerous to account here, a selection of some representative examples is needed. I believe that mistakes on a basic level serve better to demonstrate the translator's inadequacy than those on an advanced level. Accordingly, ten examples are illustrated below to show Su's lack of basic English knowledge as evidenced in his translation.

Example 1 has to do with the usage of articles in English. After rejected by La Croix de Colbas, the tavern of the Rue de Chaffaut, and a prison house, Jean Valjean came to a peasant's house and knocked there for food and shelter:

The peasant's face assumed an expression of distrust: he looked over the new-comer from head to foot, and suddenly exclaimed, with a sort of shudder: "*Are you the man!* [emphasis added]" (Hugo, 1862/1931, p. 57)

那男子聽到這裏，霎時面孔上現出一種疑惑的神色，對著華賤從頭到腳細細地打量一番，忽然大聲問道：「你是一個人嗎？ [emphasis added]」 (Hugo, 1862/1976, p. 119)

The use of the definite article “the” before “man” in the last sentence of the passage indicates that the speaker has heard about the man, as has been mentioned in a passage describing how Jean Valjean’s appearance in Digne has become a talk of the town and caused a stir of fear in the townspeople. Su’s translation “你是一個人嗎？” betrays his ignorance of the significance of the English article. Here the use of “一個” before “人” to form a concept like “one man,” “a man,” or “alone” in Chinese not only fails to do justice to the original, but is weird in the Chinese context as well. This lack of adequate knowledge of English articles is rather common in many Chinese learners of English, especially in beginners.

Example 2 is the translator’s failure to understand tense in English. While Jean Valjean was lying on a stone bench in front of a printing-office, an old woman saw him and struck up a conversation with him:

“What are you doing there, my friend?”

He replied harshly, and with anger in his tone:

“You see, my good woman, I am going to sleep.”

The good woman, who really merited the name, was Madame la Marquise de R__.

“Upon the bench?” said she.

“*For nineteen years I have had a wooden mattress, [emphasis added]*” said the man; “*to-night I have a stone one. [emphasis added]*”

“*You have been a soldier? [emphasis added]*”

“Yes, my good woman, a soldier.” (Hugo, 1862/1931, p. 59)

……「我的朋友呀，你為什麼在這裏呢？」

華賤就帶著怨恨的聲音答道：「我的慈善婆婆呀，我就在這裏睡了啊！」

老婆子道：「就睡在石椅上嗎？」

華賤道：「十九年前，我還有一張木床；今天夜裏，就變成石頭床了。[emphasis added]」

老婆子道：「你曾當過兵嗎？[emphasis added]」

華賤道：「不錯，我曾當過兵。」(Hugo, 1862/1976, p. 122)

In Jean Valjean's response to the woman "For nineteen years I have had a wooden mattress," the adverbial phrase "For nineteen years" comes together with the verb in the present perfect tense to convey a sense of a continued status. Su's rendition breaks the continuation by the use of the temporal phrase "十九年前," which refers to a specific point in time in the past. This shift makes the hero appear to be an incoherent speaker in his rambling talk that jumps from "十九年前" ("nineteen years ago") to "今天夜裡" ("tonight"). Then, the woman's rejoinder to the man in the English text "Have you been a soldier?" is prompted by the man's mention of sleeping on a wooden mattress for the past nineteen years and so makes perfect sense here. However, the Chinese translation "你曾當過兵嗎" ("Were you once a soldier before?") seems out of context: it is hard to understand how this interrogative sentence bears any relationship with the man's last reply. These problems arise from the translator's misapprehension of the present perfect tense in English, a grammatical form which, absent in Chinese, poses some difficulties for Chinese students.

In Example 3, Su's insufficient knowledge of English tense is highlighted by his failure to handle even a relatively easy tense form, along with his misreading of a sentence structure:

"Stop, stop, Monsieur Curé," exclaimed the man. "*I was famished when I came in, but you are so kind that now I don't know what I am; that is all gone.*"

[emphasis added]” (Hugo, 1862/1931, pp. 65-66)

華賤道：「我現在很餓，又渴。當我進門的時候，見了師父這樣仁慈，也就令我忘記了。[emphasis added]」 (Hugo, 1862/1976, p. 122)

The English clause “I was famished” clearly indicates a time in the past, but Su’s rendition “我現在很餓” (“I’m now hungry”) reveals his overlook of the past tense verb “was” in English. This mistake could have been avoided if the translator had noticed the subsequent adverbial clause “when I came in,” which makes the past tense expression even clearer by signifying the time of the speaker’s hunger. However, the translator breaks the sentence in the wrong way and joins the sense of “when I came in” to the next clause “but you are so kind” so that we have the translation “當我進門的時候，見了師父這樣仁慈” (“When I came in, I found you were so kind”). This misreading shows that something is wrong in the translator’s understanding of the English sentence structure.

The Chinese translator’s inadequate knowledge of English sentence structure is found in other instances. In Example 4, the translator got hold of a key word but did not grasp the structure of the sentence where it appeared:

And along with that there were many bitter experiences. . . . However that might be, his savings had been reduced, by various local charges, to the sum of a hundred and nine francs and fifteen sous, which was counted out to him on his departure.

He understood nothing of this, and *thought himself wronged; or to speak plainly, robbed* [emphasis added]. (Hugo, 1862/1931, p. 82)

不料隨後還有許多危難。當其在監中做工所得工價，除去用度，還應存百零九個銀角子和九個銅角子。不料時運不濟，**盡被強人搶劫去了，一些兒也不曾留下** [emphasis added]。(Hugo, 1862/1976, p. 178)

The English passage describes how the reduction of his earnings in prison made Jean Valjean feel robbed. The sentence “He . . . thought himself wronged; or to speak plainly, robbed” is rendered as “**盡被人搶劫去了，一些兒也不曾留下**” (“[He] was robbed of all his money, with nothing left”) so that the protagonist’s thought in the English text turns into a *fait accompli* in the translation. Before the appearance of this passage, the translator had rendered Jean Valjean’s words as he first entered the door of the bishop’s house, “我身上還帶了一百零九個銀角子和十五個銅角子” which is translated from the English “I have money . . . one hundred and nine francs and fifteen sous.” Obviously, this inconsistency about Jean Valjean’s money also escaped the translator.

Another problem with Su’s understanding of English has to do with the response to a yes-no question. Consider Example 5:

“You are humane, Monsieur Curé; you don’t despise me. A good priest is a good thing. Then you don’t want me to pay you?”

“*No*, [emphasis added]” said the bishop, “*keep your money*. [emphasis added] How much have you? You said a hundred and nine francs, I think.” (Hugo, 1862/1931, pp. 64-65)

華賤說道：「師父既然是一個慈善的人，就不用算我的飯錢了。」

.....

孟主教果然忙答道：「不然，不然，一定要算飯錢的。 [emphasis added] 你共有多少錢呢？你曾說你有一百零九個銀角子。」(Hugo, 1862/1976, p. 126)

To a yes-no question, the English response is oriented toward the answer, so that the bishop's "No" here can be transcribed more meticulously as "No, I don't (want you to pay me)." By contrast, in Chinese the reply to a yes-no question is directed toward the question itself, so that the answer "不然" ("no" or "not so") to the same question means the direct opposite: the speaker thinks the other party should pay him. Su's rendition of the bishop's "No, keep your money" as "不然，不然，一定要算飯錢的" ("Not so. You should pay for the meal after all") reverses the original sense, resulting in a complete twist of Bishop Myriel's characterization.

In addition, there are problems with some simple terms. Example 6 is a case in point:

... by the light of the expiring day the stranger perceived in one of the gardens which fronted the street a kind of hut which seemed to be made of turf; he boldly cleared a wooden fence and found himself in the garden. He neared the hut; its door was a narrow, low entrance; it resembled, *in its construction* [emphasis added], the shanties which the *road-labourers* [emphasis added] put up for their temporary accommodation. He, doubtless, thought that it was, in fact, the lodging of a road-labourer. (Hugo, 1862/1931, pp. 57-58)

朦朧間忽見街前花園裏，有一個泥和草做的小屋，即放步向前，直從那花園的木欄杆進去，走到那小屋面前。只見那屋的門口窄而且低，好像正在建造，還沒有完工的樣子 [emphasis added]，尋

思道：「這屋必定是**過路的行人** [emphasis added] 所做，預備一時過往用的……」 (Hugo, 1862/1976, p. 120)

In the passage, the road-laborer, a construction worker, is not a difficult term, and its meaning is made even more lucid by the context. The Chinese rendering “過路的行人” (“travellers who once passed by”) not only misinterprets the English term, but does not make much sense in the Chinese context. Initially, the translator mistook the previous phrase “in its construction” for “under construction” (“正在建造，還沒有完工”). This misconstruction should have more easily led to the correct understanding of the term road-laborers, but oddly enough, the translator missed the contextual clue and came up with the somewhat weird rendition “過路的行人.” This misinterpretation betrays the translator’s failure to come to the right understanding of a term through contextual reference.

Other easy phrases which escaped the translator exist in Example 7:

That evening, after his walk in the town, the Bishop of D__ *remained quite late* [emphasis added] in his room. He was busy with his great work on Duty. . . . At eight o'clock he was still at work, writing *with some inconvenience* [emphasis added] on little slips of paper, with a large book open on his knees. . . . (Hugo, 1862/1931, p. 60)

卻說太尼城有一位孟主教，一日晚上，到太尼城四處閒遊。後又因公事忙碌，所以**睡得稍遲** [emphasis added]，到了八點鐘的時候，他還擱著一本大書在腿上，手裏拿著一塊小紙，正在**不住地** [emphasis added] 寫字。(Hugo, 1862/1976, p. 122)

In the passage, the transparent phrase “remained quite late” is mistranslated into the ambiguous Chinese “睡得稍遲” (“get up late” or “go to bed late”).

Besides, the Chinese “不住地寫字” (writing nonstop), a rendition of the bishop’s act of writing “with some inconvenience,” is also wrongly comprehended.

The translator’s failure to understand some simple phrases in English finds many instances. Suffice it to cite another one in Example 8:

... the bishop continued:

“Madame Magloire, I have for a long time wrongfully withheld this silver; it belonged to the poor. Who was this man? A poor man evidently.”

“Alas! alas!” returned Madame Magloire. “*It is not on my account or mademoiselle’s; it is all the same to us. But it is on yours, monseigneur.* [emphasis added] What is monsieur going to eat from now?” (Hugo, 1862/1931, p. 88)

孟主教聞說，便滿面堆著笑容，向凡媽道：「你且不要著忙。你知道那銀器到底是誰的？原來是一個窮漢的。我久已就有些不願意要了。」

凡媽道：「雖然不是我們的，但是我們用了這麼久，也就合我們的無異了。」 [emphasis added] (Hugo, 1862/1976, p. 180)

In the English text, Madame Magloire’s reply to the bishop “It is not on my account or mademoiselle’s; it is all the same to us. But it is on yours, monseigneur” can be paraphrased as “it makes no difference to mademoiselle or me, but the matter concerns you most.” The Chinese translation “雖然不是我們的，但是我們用了這麼久，也就合我們的無異了” (“it [the silverware] may not be ours, but possession is nine points of the law, so we have a right to it”) completely misses the gist of Madame Magloire’s reply. Without actually comprehending the whole passage in the English text, the

translator might have been led by his misunderstanding of “it is all the same to us” to produce the Chinese text “也就合我們的無異了” (“so we have a right to it”) and then tried to justify his interpretation of this clause by inventing the context in his own way.

In Example 9, the translator fails to tell right from left, then misinterprets the signification of a possessive pronoun, and so confuses the directions and relative positions on a table:

The bishop's countenance was lighted up with this expression of pleasure. . . . *He seated the man at his right. Mademoiselle Baptistine, perfectly quiet and natural, took her place at his left* [emphasis added]. (Hugo, 1862/1931, p. 66)

孟主教滿面堆著笑容，請華賤坐在自己左邊，寶姑娘又坐在華賤的左邊 [emphasis added]。 (Hugo, 1862/1976, p. 127)

According to the English text, the bishop was flanked by Jean Valjean on the right and Mademoiselle Baptistine on the left. This is a typical arrangement of seats on a western table. The Chinese text “請華賤坐在自己左邊” (“[the bishop] seated Jean Valjean at his left”) reverses the relative positions of host and guest. This switch of seats is more likely caused by the translator's mistaking “left” for “right” in the English text than by a deliberate manipulation on the translator's part, for the change of seating arrangement conforms neither to western customs nor to Chinese ones. Then the subsequent translation “寶姑娘又坐在華賤的左邊” (“Mademoiselle Baptistine sat at the left of Jean Valjean”), which places the guest between the host and his sister, may have been generated by the translator's taking the possessive pronoun “his” in “took her place at his left” to refer to “Jean Valjean's” when in fact it signifies the bishop's.

The translator's eyes failed him once again in Example 10:

Meantime Madame Magloire had served up supper; it consisted of soup made of water, oil, bread, and salt, a little pork, a scrap of mutton, a few figs, a green cheese, and *a large loaf of rye bread* [emphasis added]. She had, without asking, added to the usual dinner of the bishop a bottle of fine old Mauves wine. (Hugo, 1862/1931, p. 66)

話說凡媽拿飯進來，華賤看時，有湯，有水，有鹽，有油，有豬肉，又有羊肉，又有無花果，又有一大塊烘乾的麵包 [emphasis added]，又有一大瓶紅酒，樣樣都用銀器盛來，光彩閃閃，映在鋪桌子的白布上面，真覺異樣好看。(Hugo, 1862/1976, p. 127)

The “a large loaf of rye bread” in the English text is rendered into “一大塊烘乾的麵包” (“a large loaf of dried bread”) in Chinese. The mistake is obvious: the translator must have misread the word “rye” as “dry” and was apparently unconscious how unusual and weird “dried bread” would sound in Chinese. The inadvertence of the Chinese translator is manifested here again as well as in the previous Example 9.

The ten cases provided above illustrate unequivocally the translator's problems in English comprehension, including confusing definite and indefinite articles (Example 1), misreading tense (Examples 2 and 3), failing to grasp the sentence structure (Examples 3 and 4), muddling yes-no responses (Example 5), misunderstanding some simple terms and phrases (Examples 6, 7, and 8), and mistaking the reference of possessive pronouns (Example 9). The translator's inadequate reading skill is further worsened by his occasional inadvertence in misreading one word for another (Examples 9 and 10) and his unawareness of the inconsistent plot caused by his erroneous reading (Examples

4 and 6). These are all basic errors typically committed by beginning learners of English as a foreign language. All in all, they point to the unambiguous fact that the rendition was done by someone who was by no means expert in English reading, someone whose knowledge of English was far from superb.

Su Manshu's English Writing Demonstrated in “Preface to *Voices of the Tide*”

Regarding Su's English writing skill, the only piece of material available for us to see is the Preface. To elucidate my discussion, it is advisable to quote the entire essay with each sentence numbered for easy subsequent reference:

(1) Byron and Shelley are two of the greatest British poets. (2) Both had the lofty sentiment of creation, love, as the theme of their poetic expressions. (3) Yes, although both wrote principally on love, lovers, and their fortunes, their modes of expression differ as widely as the poles.

(4) Byron was born and brought up in luxury, wealth, and liberty. (5) He was an ardent and sincere devotee of liberty—yes, he dared to claim liberty in every thing—great and small, social or political. (6) He knew not how or where he was extreme.

(7) Byron's poems are like a stimulating liquor—the more one drinks, the more one feels the sweet fascination. (8) They are full of charm, full of beauty, full of sincerity throughout.

(9) In sentimentality, enthusiasm and straightforwardness of diction, they have no equal. (10) He was a free and noble hearted man. (11) His end came while he was engaged in a noble pursuit. (12) He went to Greece, where he sided with the patriots who were fighting for their

liberty. (13) His whole life, career and production are intertwined in Love and Liberty.

(14) Shelley, though a devotee of love, is judicious and pensive. (15) His enthusiasm for love never appears in any strong outburst of expression. (16) He is a “Philosopher-lover.” (17) He loves not only the beauty of love, or love for love, but “love in philosophy” or “philosophy in love.” (18) He had depth, but not continuance: energy without youthful devotion. (19) His poems are as the moonshine, placidly beautiful, somnolently still, reflected on the waters of silence and contemplation.

(20) Shelley sought Nirvana in love; but Byron sought Action for love, and in love. (21) Shelley was self-contained and quite engrossed in his devotion to the Muses. (22) His premature and violent death will be lamented so long as English literature exists.

(23) Both Shelley and Byron’s works are worth studying by every lover of learning, for enjoyment of poetic beauty, and to appreciate the lofty ideas of Love and Liberty.

(24) In these pages, I have the honour to offer my readers translations of a few poems from the works of Byron.

(25) Hereafter, I shall try my best, to present them with the translation of the world renowned Sakuntala of the famous poet Kalidasa of Hindustan, the Land of Lord Sakya Buddha.

(26) That the labour bestowed on the present publication will be appreciated by my readers is the writer’s earnest desire.

Mandju⁶ (Su, 1976a, pp. 147-149)

⁶ Mandju is an alternative spelling of “Manshu” in romanization.

My evaluation of this piece is based on the following perspectives: general organization, sentence types, grammar, diction, and other miscellaneous characteristics. The results show that the Preface is well written. In terms of construction, the Preface consists of a comparative introduction to Byron and Shelley and a short description of the author-editor's intention to present the reader with some famous poetic lines from abroad. Of the total of 10 paragraphs, the first paragraph gives a general statement of the fundamental difference between the two Romanticists; the following three paragraphs are dedicated to the depiction of Byron; paragraphs five and six focus on Shelley; paragraph seven concludes the author's opinion about the two poets; and the last three paragraphs succinctly state what is contained and intended in the anthology. This arrangement is logical and makes perfect sense. Some flaws, however, can still be noted. For example, the fourth paragraph summarizes Byron by saying that his life is love and liberty woven together, but while the author talks about liberty in the Byron section, the topic of love is not addressed at all. Besides, in paragraph six, which deals with Shelley, the interpolation of an observation about Byron is abrupt and incongruous. Nevertheless, these minor imperfections do not negate the well-arranged general structure of the piece.

Apart from general organization, Su's writing skill can also be judged by the sentence types he uses in the Preface. By sentence types I mean the four structures of simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences. The ability to flexibly use the different types of sentences is an indication of one's dexterity in writing. A calculation of the sentence patterns used in this Preface manifests that all the four sentence types are present: there are 15 simple sentences (1, 2, 4, 8, 9, 10, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 23, 24, and 25), two compound sentences (5 and 20), eight complex sentences (3, 6, 11, 12, 14, 19, 22 and 26), and one compound-complex sentence (7). One may suspect that

the abundance of simple sentences in this article indicates an immature writing skill, but the presence of all the four types of sentence structure, particularly a compound-complex sentence, in this short piece also suggests that the writer has a good command of different sentence patterns. Thus, as far as sentence types are concerned, the Preface is well enough written.

Another assessment criterion is grammar, as the use of good grammar is usually taken as an index of good English education. An inspection of the Preface finds no ungrammatical sentences: each sentence is written in a grammatically correct way. This is another piece of evidence in favor of the good quality of the short piece.

The next standard by which to judge the Preface is diction. The words used in this essay are for the most part formal and elegant. Words and expressions such as “judicious,” “engrossed,” “placidly beautiful,” “somnolently still,” and “ardent and sincere devotee of liberty” all fall into the realm of the formal and elegant, and some of them even literary and poetic. More importantly, the usage of words is accurate, the choice of words is precise, and the terms and turns of phrases are used properly throughout the work.

Apart from the above-mentioned four perspectives, other miscellaneous characteristics can also be found to support the superiority of the Preface. For example, prepositions are used flexibly and dexterously, a skill not easily mastered by Chinese learners of English. The nuanced differences effected by shifting prepositions can be seen in the two sentences “He loves not only the beauty of love, or love for love, but ‘love in philosophy’ or ‘philosophy in love’” and “Byron sought Action for love, and in love.” These plays on prepositions are possible only with an expert manipulator of the English language. Besides, the author is capable of adopting formal, even lofty, style in his language, evidenced in sentences like “He knew not how or where he was extreme,” “I have the honour to offer my readers translations of a few poems

from the works of Byron,” and “That the labour bestowed on the present publication will be appreciated by my readers is the writer’s earnest desire.” Such a style endows the article with a touch of refinement and sophistication. Last but not least, other merits in the Preface include the writer’s competence in making good use of parallelism to effect a poetic feel (such as “They are full of charm, full of beauty, full of sincerity throughout.”), and in expressing abstract ideas well (like “love in philosophy,” “philosophy in love,” “Nirvana in love” and “Action for love”).

All in all, with its generally satisfactory organization, good variety of sentence types, accurate grammar, formal and elegant diction, and other favorable characteristics such as dexterous use of prepositions, elevated style of language, poetic touches, and capacity for articulating abstract concepts, the Preface is a well-written work, and even reads like something composed by a well-educated native speaker of English. Though not strictly perfect, its multiple strengths provide enough support for its excellence.

Contradiction: Good Writing Skills but Inadequate Reading Comprehension?

The previous two sections investigate Su Manshu’s reading and writing skills respectively, and the two-pronged results have been obtained: While Su performs well in the English writing of the Preface, he has many problems with reading comprehension in translating an English *Les Misérables*. The gap between Su’s reading and writing abilities contradicts the generally held idea that one’s reading ability can hardly be surpassed by one’s writing ability, whether in one’s own native tongue or in a foreign language. Here attention is to be drawn to a relevant fact that Su’s Chinese *Les Misérables* was rendered in 1903 while the Preface was written in 1909. One may easily suppose that

the period of six years that elapsed between the two works may have provided Su Manshu with enough time for advancing on his English skills, culminating in the considerable improvement witnessed in the later work. However, this supposition should be carefully inspected, as one's linguistic competence does not grow naturally without enough input. Particularly when the language in question is not one's mother tongue, lack of practice tends to result in stunted progress or even regress. For Su to develop substantially in English during the six years, ample time should be invested into its study. In what follows, I will chronicle Su's activities during the interval between the two works and determine how much his English writing might have improved in the course. For clarity, I would like to break the six years into several segments so that my points can be more meaningfully argued.⁷

To begin with, of the first three months after *The China National Gazette* (in which Su's Chinese version of *Les Misérables* was serialized) was banned in December, 1903, Su spent a half in Hong Kong and the other half at a temple in Huizhou (惠州), where he was tonsured to become a monk. Then followed a period of about four months, when he resumed his secular life and took a long journey to Thailand, Burma, India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Vietnam. During his stay in Thailand, he learned Sanskrit under a Buddhist priest; and in Vietnam he was temporarily initiated to monkhood. In a word, these seven months were marked by Su's traveling and Buddhist-related activities.

In the following twelve months starting from the July of 1904, Su taught English at an industrial school in Changsha (長沙), part-timing in Mingde School (明德學堂) and Jingzheng School (經正學堂), where he gave lessons in painting. His leisure time was spent in exchanging Chinese prose and poetry with his colleagues and taking short trips. Otherwise he would immerse himself

⁷ The biographical information that follows is based on the chronicles offered by Li (1993), Wen (1976) and Shao (2002).

in Buddhism or dabble in drawing.

In the July and August of 1905, Su frequented some pleasure houses in Shanghai and abandoned himself in the company of singsong girls, leading a life of dissipation. Su's life from September to December, 1905 was mainly characterized by his teaching English and drawing at Army Military School in Nanjing (南京陸軍小學), where he spent a lot of time composing poems and painting pictures. It is obvious that his interest lay primarily in poetry and painting. In January, 1906, Su taught painting at Mingde School after a brief trip to Japan. The position lasted about a half year, during which painting not only remained his dominant past-time, but became part of his major job duty.

From July to November, 1906, Su's activities involved teaching in Wanjiang Middle School (皖江中學), part-timing in Anhui Public School (安徽公學), and traveling to Shanghai, Nanjing, and Japan. Painting and translating occupied the majority of his free time. During his sojourn in Nanjing, he even attempted to become a monk, but this attempt proved futile.

From December, 1906, Su began to learn Sanskrit on his own. His hard work on this foreign language continued through the next few months and culminated in the completion of the first volume of his planned eight-volume *Sanskrit Grammar* (梵文典) in April, 1907. In fact, in the two years from 1907 to 1908, Su's attention was focused on Sanskrit learning, painting, writing, translating, and traveling. The places he stayed during the two years included Shanghai, Wenzhou, Nanchang, Hangzhou, and Japan. While in Japan he was a regular contributor to *People's Report* (民報) and *Tian Yi News* (天義報), which published many of his drawings and some of his prose works and translations. He taught Sanskrit in a Buddhist school in the last quarter of 1908, a sign indicating that Sanskrit was gradually becoming his preoccupation.

A malady that struck at the end of 1908 brought him to Japan for treatment and recuperation. During his half-year stay in Japan, he continued to delve in

drawing, verse-composing, translating, and writing. Worthy of mention is the fact that in June, 1909 he acted as an interpreter for the Sanskrit Association (梵學會), translating some Buddhist and literary texts from Sanskrit.

In August, 1909, Su returned from Japan to Shanghai, where he met the sinologist W. J. B. Fletcher for the first time. His main activities in China were still painting and translating. Two months later, in October, his English Preface was published.

From the above review of the activities undertaken by Su between his Chinese *Les Misérables* and his English Preface, we know that Su Manshu's major activities revolved around teaching, traveling, Sanskrit learning, poetry composing, drawing, and some minor literary affairs, and also remarkable is his suffering from one malady after another during this time. English learning played very little role here in this period. The only activity manifestly related to English is his briefly taking up the position as an English teacher at some schools. Though the English-teaching duty means he had to spend some time on English, the basic-level class he taught also means that no profound English knowledge was required for his instruction, so not much preparation was really needed. Besides, in his letters to his bosom friend Liu San (劉三) during this six-year period, Su talked profusely about his poem-writing, sketching, travelling, Sanskrit learning, and book publishing—i.e., activities he was doing most—but nothing about learning English was ever mentioned. If Su had devoted considerable time to studying English, he could not have made no mention of it in the correspondence. Moreover, I would like to draw attention to the fact that apart from a few Chinese translations of English poems in *Affinities in Literature* (文學因緣) and *Selected Poems of Byron* (拜倫詩選), which are excluded from the present study for reasons offered previously in the Second Section, the six years saw no other significant production of English-related translations by Su, another piece of information pointing to his neglect of

English study. Furthermore, his delicate health and limited energy consumed by his frequent traveling should only allow him to engage in things that really interested him, so that he could not have afforded too much time on English. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that Su's passion for foreign language during this period had obviously shifted to Sanskrit, which is evidenced in his correspondence with his friends. He said he had nothing else to do all day except learning Sanskrit and drawing in his letters, dated January and June 1907, to Liu San and Deng Shenghou (鄧繩侯) respectively (Su, 1976b, p. 156). In January, May, October, and November, 1907, his letters to Liu San gave expression to his plans for a trip to India to advance his Sanskrit learning (Su, 1976b, pp. 156, 157, 159, 161). Then in January, February, and September, 1908, he wrote to Liu San and spoke of his desire to take Sanskrit courses in Shinshu University (真宗大學), a Buddhist school in Japan (Su, 1976b, pp. 161, 162, 165). It is obvious from the above correspondence that Su not only spent much time studying Sanskrit, but was enthusiastic about enriching his knowledge in this language. His dedication to Sanskrit culminated in the materialization of the eight-volume *Sanskrit Grammar*. All the above points support my argument that it is rather unlikely that Su's English could have improved considerably during the six years.

Su's English Preface is good writing. To be able to write well in a foreign language, one needs a well-designed training program where a lot of practices are done and exercises are corrected by and discussed with a competent native-speaking teacher. Su Manshu did not receive any such training during the said period. Therefore, no evidence exists to support that Su Manshu's English had improved in the six years to the extent that he was able to write such impeccable English as demonstrated in the Preface.

Conclusion

Since Su Manshu was unlikely to advance significantly in his English writing skill during the said six years, the question remains how he was able to produce a brilliantly-written piece in English. Especially intriguing is the fact that judging from his performance in his works, his English writing skill apparently outshined his reading ability, an anomalous phenomenon that runs contrary to the universality that one's reading ability can hardly be surpassed by one's writing capability, whether in one's native tongue or in a foreign language. Let us not forget that Su did not receive any systematic instruction in English writing in his entire life. For him to perform better in writing than in reading would have been next to impossible. The anomaly can only be explained by the assumption that the English Preface was not representative of his actual English capability. Could it be that the Preface was ghostwritten by a native speaker of English? The chances are slim, for judging from Su's typical practice, he would have accredited the piece to the actual author. For example, in *Selected Poems of Byron*, there are two prefaces, one in Chinese, the other in English, and the English one is attributed to W. J. B. Fletcher. Similarly, in *Voices of the Tide* can be found "A Chronology of Byron's Life" ascribed to W. J. B. Fletcher. Both cases are evidence that in Su's anthologies, when a name is unusually ascribed to a piece, it indicates the authentic author.⁸ Judging from the fact that in the Preface, the name "Mandju" is specified at the end, we may believe its truthfulness.

⁸ As mentioned earlier in this paper, there are controversies of authorship about some of the pieces in Su's anthologies. Those works were not individually given any authorship information. They were assumed to be authored by Su simply because the collections were compiled, edited, or published by Su, until some of them were later found or suspected to be done by other writers or translators. Controversies happened as a result. In the cases where the name of the author is specifically given to a piece, the authorship information is undisputed.

If Su's Preface was not written vicariously by someone else, the probable reason for its good quality may be that Su's first draft may have been polished by a native English speaker. In fact, we know that it has been the custom in the publishing industry that a contributor's draft often has to undergo different types and degrees of editing, including polishing and rewriting, before finally going to print. When the draft is written in a language that is not the author's native tongue, editing by an educated native speaker becomes especially important. This may well have been the case with Su's English Preface. As for who might be Su's English editor, this is a matter of only secondary importance to the present paper, but I would like to venture a guess based on a relevant piece of biographical material. Two months prior to the appearance of Su's Preface, Su made the acquaintance of the sinologist William John Bainbrigg Fletcher. A British consul in China, Fletcher was a lover of Chinese literature, translating many ancient Chinese poems into English that were later compiled into books such as *Gems of Chinese Verse* and *More Gems of Chinese Poetry*. With his literary penchant and talent, Fletcher may well have made a perfect editor for Su's draft of the Preface. Indeed, after they met, they engaged in some literary exchanges. For example, Fletcher wrote an English poetic inscription for Su's book of paintings right after they met and Su gave him one of his paintings in return. More importantly, Su invited Fletcher to write an English preface for his *Selected Poems of Byron*, a preface which was done roughly at the same time with Su's English Preface. This also enhances the possibility of Fletcher's role in refining Su's piece. This possibility is further strengthened by the fact that the topic of the piece is on Byron and Shelley, two major figures in English Romanticism that was the literary tradition where the English diplomat came from. If Su needed to have his draft polished, the most likely and desirable one he might turn to would naturally have to be none other than Fletcher.

To make the above surmise more informing, my study also compares Su's Preface with Fletcher's preface in terms of writing style and finds that Fletcher's work is more exquisitely written. For example, in order to express that the thought of a nation may be enriched and reinvigorated through encounters with foreign thinking, Fletcher (1985) first voices his generalization in the beginning sentence "The continuance of inherited characteristics from generation to generation maintains the organism, plant, man, or nation, in its status quo until some new force or circumstance intervenes, through which is produced a new type" (p. 31). Then, after some elaboration of this central idea, he resorts to the metaphor of cell regeneration to illustrate China's revitalization through absorbing Western thought:

For thousands of years isolated China has inherited undisturbed its ancestral characteristics; but as an organism which has grown quiescent may be rejuvenated by the assimilation of plasm from another cell, so the thought of a people may be refreshed by contact with new ideas. That Western and Eastern thought is producing this rejuvenescence in the Middle Kingdom can hardly be denied. (Fletcher, 1985, pp. 32-33)

Comparing the above two cited passages with Su's Preface quoted in the Fourth Section, we may easily see that Fletcher's piece is a higher form of writing. Whereas the two Prefaces share the common traits of formal style, elevated language, and elegant fluency, the sentences Fletcher uses are still more subtly structured, and the ideas he expresses are more sophisticated. The superiority of Fletcher's piece to Su's can be explained following the thread of my speculation: as a creative writer, Fletcher could exert his literary skills at will, resulting in the higher level of writing in his Preface; but as editor Fletcher had to respect Su's draft and make changes where modification was absolutely

necessary. Thus, the qualitative and stylistic gap between the two prefaces can also support my previous conjecture that Su's Preface might be drafted by himself and then polished by Fletcher.

From the above discussion, I would like to argue that the superior quality of the Preface owed much to a good English language polisher, probably W. J. B. Fletcher, so it does not serve to demonstrate Su's improvement in English. Su's reading comprehension could not have progressed considerably in his neglect of English study during the six years, and he could not have written an immaculate English work without the help of a well-educated speaker of English. In fact, up to the time of his death in 1918, he never gave English any serious study except for the four or five years in his adolescence when he took English lessons. Therefore, I would like to conclude that Su's English may not be as good as publicly known, considering the many comprehension problems typically found in beginning learners of English in his translation of *Les Misérables*, the absence of a well-programmed English education in his time, the lack of his continued effort required for improving his English as a foreign language throughout his life, and the many-sided hobbies and engagements that distracted his attention from the study of English. In other words, the biographical description about his mastery of English cannot be taken at face value. Su only possessed a mediocre command of English. An easy English text expressing simple ideas may have been well within his grasp, but an extended literary text with complicated plot and thinking would have been beyond him. In terms of translation, especially of Hugo's bulky *Les Misérables*, his English knowledge can only allow him to get hold of the basic plot and translate roughly and often inaccurately. His comprehension of the novel was by no means sufficient for more nuanced expressions of the original if he had adopted the mode of meticulous rendering like Wilbour, Wraxall, and Hapgood.

However, this paper is not intended to denounce Su's English contributions and literary achievements so much as to draw attention to the fact that language learning, especially foreign languages, is a time-consuming process, which takes more than several years to really get into the essential core of it. Su's four-or-five-year career in English learning cannot equip him with the comprehensive knowledge of English required for translating so difficult a work as *Les Misérables*. On the other hand, we also need to contextualize his English skills and remember that in Su's time, when English education was not yet popularized in China and resources for learners of English were not as profuse as we have today, Su's English was good enough for him to use it to his own advantage, coupling it with his command of Chinese, his unusual literary talent, and his ingenious creativity, to suit his purpose of promoting his political agenda. The fact that at the age of 19 he had the ambition and basic skills to translate Hugo's novel is enough to mark him as a rare child prodigy among his contemporaries, only that his English was not without problems in dealing with his task.

Su Manshu was a quick learner, able to advance his English knowledge above the level of most of his contemporaries in a few years of sporadic and unsystematic training, but his lack of prolonged, continuous effort and labor in English study prevented him from achieving the proficiency required for professional translation. The existing biographical material about Su's English proficiency is overstated, but this paper is just an attempt to assess Su's English in a more objective way without denying his linguistic abilities.

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