



Strategies for Constructing Liu Bei's Image in English Translations of *Sanguo Yanyi*

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ABSTRACT

Sanguo Yanyi, an eminent and impactful ancient historical novel, has achieved considerable recognition and holds perpetual allure. Currently, there exist three English translations of *Sanguo Yanyi*, originating from different historical periods. In this paper, we focus on the character image of Liu Bei, employing it as a case study to analyze and compare the translation methods employed in these three translations. The aim is to scrutinize the translation strategies that effectively convey the portrayal of character images.

Keywords: *Sanguo Yanyi*, English translations, Liu Bei's image, translation methods, strategies

1. Introduction

Sanguo Yanyi holds significant literary and historical value, marking its position as a pioneering work in the history of Chinese literature (Xu, 2017). Often referred to as the “Oriental Iliad”, it has garnered immense popularity both domestically and internationally, with translations available in over 60 languages (Wang & Du, 2006). In the realm of literary translations, the portrayal of characters plays a pivotal role in the narrative. The ability of a literary work to deeply resonate with readers hinges upon the presence of well-developed and multifaceted characters. Characters not only steer the course of the narrative but also serve as direct reflections of the work's underlying themes. Liu Bei stands out as a quintessential character in *Sanguo Yanyi*, embodying a myriad of personality traits, and military prowess, and garnering diverse evaluations from other characters.

To date, there have been three noteworthy English translations of the novel. These include C. H. Brewitt-Taylor's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Brewitt-Taylor's) published in 1925, Moss Roberts' *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel* (Roberts') in 1994, and Yu Sumei's translation of *The Three Kingdoms* (Yu's) published in 2014. This paper aims to analyze and synthesize the translation methods employed by these different translators in order to explore the construction of Liu Bei's image. The findings will provide valuable insights and methodologies for crafting character images in the translation of literary works.

2. Research Corpus

Brewitt-Taylor's, Roberts' and Yu's translations are all based on the Chinese novel annotated by Mao Zonggang and his father, thus making them comparable. For the purpose of this study, the source text selected is Mao's version which was initially published by the People's Literature Publishing House in 1953 and later reprinted in 2021. Brewitt-Taylor's translation used in this study is a reprint from 2002, Roberts' translation is the 1994 edition, and Yu's translation is the version published in 2014. To begin, this study gathers descriptions of Liu Bei's image from the source text and then aligns them with corresponding descriptions found in the English translations to establish a small parallel corpus.

3. Liu Bei's Image Construction

Through summarizing the corpus, it is found that Liu Bei's image is predominantly constructed through three aspects: physical appearance description, personality traits, and military prowess. This study aims to undertake a qualitative analysis by selecting representative examples from the corpus.

3.1 Liu Bei's Physical Appearance

Physiognomy is a traditional doctrine in Chinese culture that analyzes a person's character, destiny,

and fortune by examining their facial features. With a long-standing presence in Chinese culture, it has significantly influenced both individuals and society. In the historical novel *Three Kingdoms*, the description of Liu Bei's appearance is frequently utilized to illustrate the character's traits and fate, thereby exemplifying the profound significance of physiognomy in Chinese culture.

(1) Source Text: 两耳垂肩，双手过膝，目能自顾其耳。(Luo, 2021: 43-44)

Brewitt-Taylor's: His ears were long, the lobes touching his shoulders, and his hands hung down below his knees. His eyes were very prominent so that he could see backwards past his ears. (Brewitt-Taylor, 1925: 14)

Roberts': His ear lobes were elongated, his eyes widely set and able to see his own ears. (Roberts, 1994: 21)

Yu's: He had exceptionally long ears, the lobes touching his shoulders so that his eyes could see his own ears. His arms were long, too, with his hands hanging down below his knees. (Yu, 2014: 30)

Upon comparing the three English translations of the source text, it is observed that all of them employed a literal translation method and utilized the "so... that" structure, conforming to grammatical norms. However, there is a distinction in Yu's translation in the first sentence, where she attributes Liu Bei's distinct appearance, with his eyes being able to see his ears, to the largeness of his earlobes. In contrast, the other two translations attribute the reason to Liu Bei's prominent eyes. It is important to note that in Chinese culture, individuals with large earlobes are considered to be blessed from a young age. These individuals tend to possess an optimistic and positive personality, demonstrate generosity towards others, and are more likely to receive assistance from noble individuals. This is perceived as a symbol of good fortune and luck. Therefore, in this example, Yu's translation is more accurate than the other two in reflecting traditional Chinese culture.

(2) Source Text: 面如冠玉，唇若涂脂。(Luo, 2021: 44)

Brewitt-Taylor's: His complexion was clear as jade and he had rich red lips. (Brewitt-Taylor, 1925: 14)

Roberts': His face was flawless as jade, and his lips like dabs of rouge. (Roberts, 1994: 21)

Yu's: He had a jade-like complexion and rich, red lips. (Yu, 2014: 30)

In the description of Liu Bei's appearance, both Brewitt-Taylor and Yu translate "lips like dabs of rouge" as "Liu Bei's lips being red and plump," using a free translation method and providing an explanation for "dabs of rouge". It is worth noting that rouge is a common reference in traditional Chinese culture. However, both Brewitt-Taylor and Yu omit this cultural element in their translations. On the other hand, Roberts employs a literal translation method, rendering the phrase as Liu Bei's lips appearing as if coated with rouge. This translation is closer to the intended meaning of the source text, conveying the idea that Liu Bei's lips are red and beautiful, while also leaving room for the readers' imagination. This interpretation enhances the infectious and expressive power of the description.

3.2 Liu Bei's Personality Traits

During the Three Kingdoms period, frequent warfare and a difficult living environment left the people desperately yearning for a benevolent ruler. The character of Liu Bei, known for his kindness and accessibility to the common people, is portrayed with increasing prominence in the novel *Three*

Kingdoms.

(3) Source Text: 陶谦见玄德仪表轩昂，言语豁达 (Luo, 2021: 194)

Brewitt-Taylor: T'ao Ch'ien was delighted with Liu Pei, admiring his noble appearance and clear speech. (Brewitt-Taylor, 1925: 135)

Roberts': Tao Qian secretly rejoiced at finding in Liu Xuande a man of dignified bearing and high-minded speech, and he was delighted with Liu Pei, admiring his noble appearance and clear speech. (Roberts, 1994: 142)

Yu's: Tao Qian was delighted with Liu Bei, admiring his noble appearance and clear speech. (Yu, 2014: 223)

Regarding the portrayal of Liu Bei's open-mindedness, both Brewitt-Taylor and Yu share a common approach by using literal translation. They depict Liu Bei as being able to deliver his speeches clearly. On the other hand, Roberts takes a free translation approach by using the word "high-minded". This term, as interpreted in the Collins Dictionary, refers to someone with strong moral principles. By using this term, Roberts emphasizes the high moral standards present in Liu Bei's speeches and highlights his characterization as a benevolent ruler. This portrayal aligns more closely with Liu Bei's true character and image.

(4) Source Text: 玄德曰：孔文举令备来救徐州，为义也。 (Luo, 2021: 196)

Brewitt-Taylor's: Liu Pei replied, "I came at the request of K'ung Wen-chu because it was the right thing to do. (Brewitt-Taylor, 1925: 137)

Roberts': "Governor Kong Rong brought me here," responded Xuande, "to relieve Xuzhou as a matter of honor." (Roberts, 1994: 145)

Yu's: Liu Bei replied, "I came at the request of Prefect Kong because it was the right thing to do. (Yu, 2014: 227)

This sentence portrays Liu Bei's own words and his belief that it was a matter of honor to relieve Xuzhou. Both Brewitt-Taylor and Yu present a literal rendition emphasizing Liu Bei's belief that it was the right thing to do and therefore he went to relieve Xuzhou. However, this interpretation alone may not fully capture the desired portrayal of Liu Bei's personality traits. The most important aspect here is Liu Bei's benevolence and righteousness, which act as an inner driving force compelling him to come to the rescue of Xuzhou.

Roberts' translation, taking a free translation approach, presents the concept that Liu Bei regarded the rescue of Xuzhou as a matter of honor and fought for the sake of his own honor. This portrayal effectively showcases Liu Bei as a benevolent ruler, whose righteousness was so unwavering that he subordinated his own life to the pursuit of justice. In a world engulfed in chaos, Liu Bei's adherence to personal honor becomes even more remarkable, transforming him from a humble straw sandal peddler into a legendary monarch.

By highlighting Liu Bei's commitment to honor and his continuous self-reflection, Roberts' translation adds depth to his transformation and underscores his journey from an ordinary individual to a revered ruler.

(5) Source Text: 玄德泣曰：“举大事者必以人为本。今人归我，奈何弃之。” (Luo, 2021: 692)

Brewitt-Taylor's: But Yuan-te wept, saying, "The success of every great enterprise depends upon humanity; how can I abandon these people who have joined me?" (Brewitt-Taylor, 1925: 514)

Roberts': Xuande replied with deep feeling, "The human factor is the key to any undertaking. How can we abandon those who have committed themselves to us?" (Roberts, 1994: 496)

Yu's: But Liu Bei replied with tears in his eyes: "The success of every great enterprise lies in people. Now that the people have come to me, how can I abandon them?" (Yu, 2014: 866)

Liu Bei shed tears on multiple occasions in the novel, and this particular instance highlights one of those moments. Liu Bei expressed, "The success of every great endeavour hinges on the people. Now that the people have gathered around me, how can I abandon them?" This statement illustrates Liu Bei as a compassionate ruler who cherishes his people as if they were his own family and treats his generals with kindness to foster their contributions. This scene vividly portrays Liu Bei's profound love for his people and the deep bond between him and his loyal followers.

3.3 Liu Bei's Military Prowess

Liu Bei's military prowess may not have been exceptional, but it is closely intertwined with the formation of his overall persona. His genuine concern and benevolence towards his troops resonated deeply, attracting an increasing number of individuals who were willing to join his cause and fight alongside him without hesitation.

(6) Source Text: 玄德曰：“吾初入蜀中，恩信未立，此事绝不可行。二人再三劝说，玄德只是不从。(Luo, 2021: 942)

Brewitt-Taylor's: In spite of the persuasion of Pang Tung and Fa Cheng, Liu Bei steadily refused to sanction the assassination of his host, even if thereby he was to gain possession of the land of Shu. Liu Bei steadily refused to sanction the assassination of his host, even if thereby he was to gain possession of the land of Shu. (Brewitt-Taylor, 1925: 750)

Roberts': But Xuande stood firm against their counsel, saying, "Having just entered the realm, we have neither goodwill nor credibility. It would never work." (Roberts, 1994: 723)

Yu's: In spite of the persuasion of Pang Tong and Fa Zheng, Liu Bei consistently refused to approve of the plot to assassinate his kinsman, Liu Zhang, even if he could gain possession of Yizhou by that means. (Yu, 2014: 1248)

In this excerpt, Liu Bei's perspective on the conquest of Shuzhong and the depiction of his military tactics are presented. Brewitt-Taylor employs the past tense, indicating that Liu Bei eventually captured Shuzhong despite his initial reluctance. On the other hand, Yu portrays Liu Bei as having the capability to seize Shuzhong, accentuating the fact that he would eventually set aside his initial reservations and claim the territory.

Roberts' translation, however, cleverly conveys Liu Bei's own statement that this approach would not work at all, strongly reflecting his unwillingness to seize Shuzhong. It does not directly address whether or not Liu Bei eventually seized the territory, but instead translates the reason as "having neither goodwill nor credibility" – implying that Liu Bei had not yet gained the trust of the people in Shuzhong. This further underscores Liu Bei's image as a monarch who consistently prioritizes the welfare of his people.

It is important to note that while Liu Bei possessed the ability to capture Shuzhong, his focus on

benevolence, righteousness, trust, and his deep love for the people, akin to that of a son, sets him apart from other warlords in the tumultuous era. Roberts' translation deliberately aligns with the author's intention of portraying these qualities, thus ensuring a well-rounded characterization of Liu Bei as a benevolent ruler.

(7) Source Text: 朕不为弟报仇，虽有万里江山，何足为贵？ (Luo, 2021: 1176)

Brewitt-Taylor's: "What care I for myriads of li of territory as long as my brother is unavenged?" (Brewitt-Taylor, 1925: 963)

Roberts': "If I should fail to avenge my brother, the possession of these ten thousand li of mountains and rivers would make an unworthy prize." (Roberts, 1994: 958)

Yu's: "What do I care for an empire of a myriad of li as long as my brother is unavenged?" (Yu, 2014: 1649)

When it comes to military strategy, the novel portrays Liu Bei as not possessing exceptionally superior combat skills. Nonetheless, Liu Bei consistently adheres to a people-centric approach. This is evident from his initial pursuit of Cao's army, where he prioritizes the safety of the elderly, weak, sick, and disabled, to his later reckless engagements in battle following Guan Yu's demise. In terms of translation, Roberts renders "gui" (贵) as "Noble," while Brewitt-Taylor and Yu incorporate this meaning in the word CARE. Comparatively, Roberts offers a more appropriate and reasonable explanation, aligning better with the factual events.

(8) Source Text: Xuan De's defeated army was less than a thousand, and he ran in distress. (Luo, 2021: 529)

Brewitt-Taylor's: When Yuan-te collected his men he found they numbered only a thousand, and this halting and broken force marched as fast as possible to the west. (Brewitt-Taylor, 1925: 381)

Roberts': The harried remnants of Xuande's troops—now less than a thousand—pressed on. (Roberts, 1994: 383)

Yu's: When Liu Bei collected his men he found they numbered only a thousand. This scattered and broken force marched as fast as possible to the west. (Yu, 2014: 647)

Regarding the translation of Liu Bei's defeat, both Brewitt-Taylor and Yu adopt a literal translation, describing Liu Bei's army dispersing and fleeing to the West. On the other hand, Roberts interprets Liu Bei's escape differently, emphasizing his determination to persist despite the difficulties. Despite losing the battle, Liu Bei managed to remain composed and resilient. At the beginning of his career, Liu Bei faced rejection due to his background, yet he fought with increasing bravery and carved out his own path. This interpretation aptly highlights Liu Bei's military prowess and unyielding spirit. It evokes the memory of Li Ziqing's rhymed letter, a renowned work from the Qing Dynasty that portrays constant battles despite repeated defeats. Roberts' translation highlights Liu Bei's multidimensional personality. It presents the historical legend of Liu Bei, a monarch characterized by unwavering willpower and resilience, more vividly.

4. Conclusion

By comparing the three English translations, it becomes evident that Brewitt-Taylor's and Yu's translations exhibit certain cultural attributes and present a somewhat simplified portrayal of Liu Bei.

Conversely, Roberts' translation constructs a more multifaceted and comprehensive image of Liu Bei, employing various translation methods and vocabulary choices appropriately. It effectively depicts Liu Bei as a resolute monarch with a people-centric approach, possessing a profound sense of benevolence. This rendering aligns well with the historical context and remains faithful to the source text.

Conflicts of Interest: The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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