



A Comparative Analysis of Liu Bei's Image in the English Versions of *Sanguo Yanyi*: A Perspective on Poetry Translation

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ABSTRACT

Sanguo Yanyi, a Chinese classical historical novel, contains a total of 207 poems. This paper presents a comparative analysis of the portrayal of Liu Bei in the English translations of the novel from the perspective of poetry translation. By examining the translations by Brewitt-Taylor and Moss Roberts, we aim to explore the nuances and variations in Liu Bei's image as portrayed in the poems. Selected examples are analyzed to highlight Liu Bei's image characteristics, including his adeptness, benevolent nature, and ambitious demeanor. The translations are compared in terms of their focus on readability versus fidelity to the original text. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the interpretation and representation of Liu Bei's character in English-language adaptations of *Sanguo Yanyi*, shedding light on the challenges and possibilities of poetry translation in a historical and cultural context.

Keywords: *Sanguo Yanyi*; Liu Bei's image; Brewitt-Taylor; Moss Roberts; Poetry translation

1. Introduction

Sanguo Yanyi, written by the renowned novelist Luo Guanzhong during the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties, holds the distinction of being the earliest historical novel in Chinese literature and is considered one of the four classic Chinese works. The Jiajing Renwu edition, esteemed as the most authoritative version, underwent modification by Chinese literary critic Mao Zonggang during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. In addition to detailed annotations, Mao Zonggang added a remarkable 207 poems to the novel.

These poems derive from five distinct sources: the first being those composed by the original author of the novel, the second being the works of esteemed poets from the Tang and Song dynasties, the third comprising excerpts from dramas from the Song and Yuan dynasties, the fourth encompassing verses crafted by historical figures during the Three Kingdoms period, and the fifth consisting of poems created by Mao Zonggang during the process of editing and annotating the novel. With such a myriad of sources and authors, the poetic sections of *Sanguo Yanyi* are characterized by their complexity and diversity.

This article delves into the depiction of the character Liu Bei through poetry in two English translations of *Sanguo Yanyi* - one by British translator C. H. Brewitt-Taylor (1925) and another by American translator Moss Roberts (1992). By utilizing a parallel corpus and conducting a comparative analysis, it examines the distinct translation styles and characteristics of the poetry, as well as analyzes the portrayal of Liu Bei's character. Of the 120 chapters in *Sanguo Yanyi*, this study specifically focuses on the sections related to Liu Bei, which span from the first chapter to the 85th chapter. The corpus compiled for analysis encompasses all the poems regarding Liu Bei within these 85 chapters. The following will be a qualitative analysis of the representative examples.

2. The Image of Liu Bei Reflected in Poetry

The character of Liu Bei is widely recognized in China, with his historical accounts primarily found in Chen Shou's *Records of the Three Kingdoms*. Liu Bei is described as a compassionate and generous figure, known for his selflessness and as a role model. He exemplifies the qualities of a benevolent gentleman, a title he rightfully deserves. Moreover, throughout his military career as a Shu Han pioneer, he also emerged as a heroic figure. While these two identities may initially appear conflicting, they harmonize in poetry, ultimately shaping the multi-dimensional nature of Liu Bei's personality. Under

the translations of two exceptionally skilled translators, the depth and complexity of Liu Bei's character become more pronounced. These translations highlight the following aspects in particular:

2.1 *A Man of Great Dexterity*

①运筹决算有神功，二虎还须逊一龙。
初出便能垂伟绩，自应分鼎在孤穷。（chapter 1:31）

Brewitt-Taylor: Tho' fierce as tigers soldiers be,
Battles are won by strategy.
A hero comes; he gains renown,
Already destined for a crown.

Moss Roberts: Seasoned plans and master moves; all's divinely done.
To one mighty dragon two tigers can't compare.
At his first trial what victories are won!
Poor orphan boy? The realm is his to share.

Xu Yuanchong (1984) is a prominent figure in the field of translation. In his book *Translation and Art*, he introduces the concept of the "three beauties": the beauty of meaning, the beauty of sound, and the beauty of form. The beauty of meaning refers to the reflection of the original text's content in translation. Phonological beauty requires translations to possess rhythmic flow and pleasant sound. The beauty of form necessitates orderly line lengths and well-structured sentences. Building upon the principles of "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance," the "three beauties" theory solidifies traditional translation standards.

Regarding "sound beauty," Brewitt-Taylor's translation exhibits an AABB style, with the words "be" and "strategy" both ending in /i/ sound, while "renown" and "crown" both end with a nasal /n/ sound. In Moss Roberts' translation, "done" and "won" produce an immediate /n/ sound rhyme, while "compare" and "share" end with /eə/ sound rhyme. Generally, Roberts adopts an ABAB interlinear interactive rhyme style. Upon examining the original text, it is apparent that the words "功," "龙," and "穷" all contain the "ong" sound. The first sentence demonstrates rhyming and a rich musical quality, showcasing the success of Brewitt-Taylor and Moss Roberts in achieving harmonious sound beauty, rendering the translation easy to read.

In terms of "shape beauty," Brewitt-Taylor's translation demonstrates a consistent pattern with six, five, six, and five words in the four sentences, respectively. This creates a sense of symmetry, as the first and third sentences mirror each other, as do the second and fourth sentences. On the other hand, Moss Roberts' translation presents a sense of order, with eight, eight, eight, and nine words in the four sentences, respectively. Du Ximeng (2023) has pointed out that due to the variations in Chinese and Western thinking, as well as the use of words and phrases, it can be challenging to match the number of words, lines, length, and stanzas in translations with the original poem. However, both Moss Roberts and Brewitt-Taylor's translations have successfully maintained an orderly "shape," which is commendable.

In terms of "beauty of meaning," Brewitt-Taylor's translation exhibits a tendency towards free translation. It employs English idiomatic expressions to some extent, thereby enhancing readers' comprehension of the underlying meaning of the text. By grasping the essence of the entire poem,

Brewitt-Taylor effectively conveys the intended message of the author. On the other hand, Moss Roberts' translation leans towards literal translation, adopting Chinese expression conventions, including voice and word order. In Chinese, the active voice is more commonly used, whereas English tends to favour the passive voice. Moss Roberts strives to employ the active voice as frequently as possible in the translation, enabling English readers to intuitively perceive the original text's expression order and comprehend the Chinese thinking mode.

For instance, let's take the line "运筹决算有神功，二虎还须逊一龙" as an example. Brewitt-Taylor's translation reads "Tho' fierce as tigers soldiers be, Battles are won by strategy." This translation directly equates "二虎" to "soldiers," which is a viewpoint unique to Brewitt-Taylor. In the original text, "二虎" actually refers to Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, symbolizing Liu Bei's astute overall awareness and strategic prowess. The imagery of the "龙" (dragon) is completely omitted in this translation, and the concept of "逊" is translated as "won." The passive voice is employed, highlighting the significance of "strategy" or "运筹决算." Overall, although the translation makes substantial modifications, it fails to faithfully capture the essence of the original sentence. Nonetheless, it effectively conveys the intended meaning in a straightforward and easily understandable manner, emphasizing the importance of "运筹决算."

On the other hand, Moss Roberts translates the line as "Seasoned plans and master moves; all's divinely done. To one mighty dragon two tigers can't compare." This translation adopts a literal approach, successfully adhering to the original characters and wording while maintaining the active voice. It better preserves the elegance of the original Chinese text. However, it requires readers to think about the sudden appearance of the "dragon" and "tigers" in the sentence, which encourages a deeper understanding of Chinese culture.

②巧借闻雷来掩饰，随机应变信如神。（chapter 21:204）

Brewitt-Taylor: But he cleverly used the thunder peal
As excuse for turning pale;
O quick to seize occasions thus!
He surely must prevail.

Moss Roberts: He seizes on the thunder as the cause
A perfect ploy negotiates the pause.

In terms of phonetic beauty, Brewitt-Taylor's translations of "peal," "pale," and "prevail" were aligned with the /l/ rhyme, while Moss Roberts' translations of "cause" and "pause" were matched with the loosened/z/ rhyme. Despite these variations, both translations maintained a harmonious sound quality.

In terms of structural beauty, Brewitt-Taylor translated the text into four sentences, with word counts of 7, 5, 6, and 4 respectively. On the other hand, Moss Roberts employed two sentences, with word counts of 8 and 6 respectively. Although the number of words in each sentence differed slightly, the lengths of the words were varied.

Regarding the meaning and aesthetic beauty, Brewitt-Taylor's translation encompassed four sentences, incorporating his own interpretation. He added "turning pale" to complement what the original text implied, showing his admiration for Liu Bei's astuteness. The term "surely must prevail" expresses Brewitt-Taylor's resolute belief in Liu Bei's success, with "surely" indicating absolute

certainty according to the Oxford Dictionary (8th Edition).

Moss Roberts, on the other hand, translated the text into two sentences, highlighting the ingenuity displayed by Liu Bei by cleverly responding to the sound of thunder. He praises this cunning strategy as a perfect ploy and explains his belief in Liu Bei's godlike qualities based on the faithful portrayal in the original text. The intention here is to ensure that readers understand and appreciate the original style without becoming confused.

Overall, the analysis of the first and 21st translations reveals that both translators emphasize Liu Bei's qualities of quickness and resourcefulness, effectively highlighting his prominence through their distinct translation approaches. Brewitt-Taylor tends to prioritize the depiction of Liu Bei's character. In the third sentence of the first translation, Brewitt-Taylor adds a supplementary translation for "a hero comes," emphasizing Liu Bei's role as the heroic figure who achieved victory. The addition of "He surely must prevail" not only maintains the aesthetic quality in terms of sound and form but also directly conveys Liu Bei's astuteness and calmness when faced with critical moments.

On the other hand, Moss Roberts focuses on providing comprehensive descriptions and, through these descriptions, enables readers to perceive Liu Bei's astuteness and composure. The first two sentences emphasize the significance of strategic calculations, while the third sentence highlights Liu Bei's achievements. The final sentence conveys that "分鼎" signifies his ownership of the world, with the subject still being "The realm." It is evident that Moss Roberts remains faithful to the original events, maintaining a strong correlation with the original text in terms of structure. Additionally, he allows readers to perceive Liu Bei's flexibility through Wen Lei's attempt at concealment.

Both translations provide readers with insights into Liu Bei's character from direct and indirect perspectives, ultimately rendering a more nuanced portrayal of Liu Bei's astute qualities. Furthermore, the mastery of "beauty of sound" and "beauty of form" significantly contributes to the readers' appreciation of the beauty of translation.

2.2 A Model of Benevolent Monarch

In Yan Mo's "On Sanguo Yanyi" (*Journal of Literature and Art*, 1956), it is pointed out that Liu Bei is an emerging heroic leader, full of ambition and aspirations. The author also portrays Liu Bei as a magnanimous and benevolent figure, caring for the people and always seeking talented individuals. Liu Bei is depicted as someone who understands people and knows how to effectively lead them.

One notable example is when Liu Xuande crossed the river with the people in Chapter 41. Zhao Zilong rode alone to rescue him, while Cao Cao's troops arrived at Fancheng, forcing Liu Bei to retreat. Despite facing this difficult situation, there were still over 100,000 people willing to accompany him, even though they could only advance ten miles a day. Some people suggested that Liu Bei should temporarily abandon them and prioritize his own safety. However, Liu Bei insisted on putting the people first and decided to stay with them, demonstrating his commitment to the well-being of his subjects. This exemplifies the image of Liu Bei as a benevolent king who genuinely cares for his people, as vividly portrayed in the poem.

③临难仁心存百姓，登舟挥泪动三军。
至今凭吊襄江口，父老犹然忆使君。（chapter 41:388）

Brewitt-Taylor: In time of stress his heart was tender toward the people,
And he wept as he went down into the ship,

Moving the hearts of soldiers to sympathy.
Even today, in the countryside,
Fathers and elders recall the Princely One's kindness.

Moss Roberts: In mortal straits, good of heart, he kept his flock from harm;
Riverborne, the tearful leader won his army's love.
And still today men mark the site with solemn piety;
And older folks keep Lord Liu in cherished memory.

By comparing the two translations, it is evident that Moss Roberts' rendition is better polished in terms of its beauty of sound and form. The translation maintains a more orderly structure and possesses a flowing cadence when read aloud. On the other hand, Brewitt-Taylor's translation leans more towards delving into Liu Bei's underlying motivations and desires, while Moss Roberts' translation focuses more on illustrating the impact of Liu Bei's actions.

Both translations emphasize in their opening sentence that Liu Bei's motivation stems from his tender heart. However, Moss Roberts' translation proceeds to portray the love and respect Liu Bei garnered from his army, his companions, and the elderly. Brewitt-Taylor's translation skillfully employs a few sentences to vividly depict the scenes, emotions, and moments that touched people's hearts, remaining faithful to the original text. Three or two sentences eloquently capture the soldiers' and elders' moving sense of sympathy and kindness towards Liu Bei, which further reflects his motives.

Overall, Brewitt-Taylor's translation predominantly showcases Liu Bei's motivations through the three narratives, while Moss Roberts' translation emphasizes the effects of his actions through four narratives.

From the perspective of the reader, upon reading both translations, we not only appreciate the outstanding virtues of Liu Bei's benevolence and kindness but also witness the ancient renown bestowed upon him through his actions. Through this comparative analysis, we are able to gain a more vivid depiction of the benevolent king portrayed in the original text.

2.3 A Fierce and Ambitious Character

In the *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, specifically in Zhou Yu's biography, there is a passage that documents how Liu Bei, as the Left General in charge of livestock herding in Jingzhou, was regarded by Zhou Yu. In a message to Sun Quan, Zhou Yu noted, "Liu Bei possessed a fierce and ambitious demeanor, and considering his association with the formidable generals Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, it is clear he is not one to be content as a mere subordinate for long." This passage reveals that beyond his portrayal as a benevolent ruler, Liu Bei also possessed a formidable leadership capacity that should not be underestimated. While Mao Zonggang's rendition of *Sanguo Yanyi* magnifies Liu Bei's depiction as a paragon of benevolence, this approach inevitably weakens the portrayal of his fierce and ambitious nature. Nonetheless, as the founder of the Shu Han regime, it is indisputable that his fierce and ambitious spirit remained a defining characteristic.

④曹公屈指从头数，天下英雄独使君。
髀肉复生犹感叹，争教寰宇不三分？（chapter 34:322）

Brewitt-Taylor: When with crooking fingers counting,

Ts'ao Ts'ao reckoned up the forceful
 Men of real determination,
 Only two he found; and one was Yuan-te.
 But by inaction
 He had grown both fat and slothful;
 Yet the months and years in passing
 Fretted him with nought accomplished.

Moss Roberts: Lord Cao named the rivals that he owned:
 "Inspector, you're the second of the realm!"
 But Xuande felt his sinews going slack—
 How could he keep the world of Han intact?

Brewitt-Taylor's translations are commended in various instances. For instance, the expression "reckoned up" is employed to summarize, while "calculation" serves as an addition to the previous imagery of "crooking fingers counting," depicting a method of counting from the mind and establishing a connection. Furthermore, the phrase "inaction by inaction" conveys the concept of "髀肉复生," signifying the revival of flabby flesh. Another noteworthy addition is the line "Yet the months and years in passing," which evokes the passage of time, intensifying Liu Bei's feelings of shame caused by his inaction and paving the way for the final sentence. This supplementary approach greatly enhances the coherence of the translation, creating a logical flow that is more easily embraced by readers.

Additionally, Brewitt-Taylor offers his own interpretation of "Fretted him with nought accomplished," emphasizing Liu Bei's erosion, depletion, and sense of helplessness brought about by his deep shame. Because Liu Bei failed to take action, the Han Dynasty ultimately collapsed, disintegrated, and lost its unity. The translation of the figurative term "three parts" not only expresses Liu Bei's regret for his unfulfilled ambitions and the division of the Han Dynasty but also enhances the readability for readers. Finally, Brewitt-Taylor demonstrates skill in rendering "hero" as "the forceful Men of real determination." Here, Liu Bei is portrayed as a hero characterized by his strength, determination, and resolute nature. It becomes evident that Brewitt-Taylor perceives Liu Bei as a powerful individual with genuine resolve. This portrayal not only accentuates the feeling of regret but also illustrates Liu Bei's fierce demeanor, contrasting with the surface-level depiction of his inaction evident in the translation.

Moss Roberts's translation leans more towards literal translation, aiming to preserve the original Chinese style. However, in certain instances, he employs a method of orthodoxy in translation. For instance, the phrase "独使君" in conjunction with the original text actually refers to Liu Bei in addition to Cao Cao. Therefore, the translator uses "second" to translate "独," making the language concise and easily comprehensible for readers. Similarly, the translator presents questions on how to "keep the world of Han intact" and translates "分" as "intact," simplifying the reading difficulty for readers and enhancing the translation's readability.

Furthermore, the translator utilizes dashes in three or four sentences, indicating Liu Bei's consistent contemplation on how to maintain the unity of the Han Dynasty. This conveys Liu Bei's ambition and concern for his country.

⑤ 梟雄玄德掣双锋，抖擞天威施勇烈。（chapter 5:67）

Brewitt-Taylor: Next Yuan-te joined the battle, gripping his twin sword blades,
The heavens themselves trembled at the majesty of his wrath.

Moss Roberts: With double swords Xuande now joins the fight.
The crafty owl will show his zeal and might.

This poem is derived from the renowned scene of the Three Heroes battling against Lü Bu, where Liu Bei, as depicted above, takes center stage. Both Brewitt-Taylor and Moss Roberts initially opt for a literal translation approach in the first half of this sentence. However, in the latter half, Brewitt-Taylor continues with a literal translation, portraying Liu Bei as a brave and fearless warrior who emanates a heroic presence capable of making even the bravest tremble in his wrath. On the other hand, Moss Roberts employs the imagery of a "craft owl" to characterize Liu Bei. In foreign cultures, an owl is often regarded as a symbol of wisdom, while "craft" implies a form of cunning intelligence. It is evident that Moss Roberts perceives Liu Bei more as a resourceful monarch than a skilled warrior. This interpretation aligns with Mao Zonggang's notion of magnifying Liu Bei's image as a benevolent ruler while downplaying his heroic attributes in his book. The divergent perspectives expressed by the two translators offer readers a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted abilities encapsulated within the phrase "a fierce and ambitious character".

3. Conclusion

Dong Xiu (2016) highlighted that Moss Roberts, in his translation, prioritizes fully conveying the various layers of the original text while taking into consideration the receptive abilities of English readers. He aims to present familiar yet fresh information to the target language readers. This approach aligns with our research findings, which indicate his frequent use of literal translation in his poems and his careful attention to preserving the features of Chinese word order, structure, and even tone. Moss Roberts tends to embrace Chinese thinking and respects Chinese expressions in his translations. On one hand, this facilitates the effective transmission of the original text to foreign readers, minimizing the loss of certain elements that may be due to cultural differences. On the other hand, it reflects his commitment to fidelity in translation. Furthermore, when examining his translations from the perspective of Xu Yuanchong's theory of three beauty, it becomes evident that they often achieve a harmonious integration of sound beauty, visual beauty, and semantic beauty. This results in translations that are both easy to read and visually pleasing, while also remaining faithful to the original content to a great extent.

Brewitt-Taylor's translation stands out for its remarkable readability. Ancient poetry and prose are known for their brevity and depth, often requiring a deep understanding of relevant knowledge to be fully comprehended. However, foreign readers, due to cultural differences, often lack the necessary reserves to grasp the profound content of ancient poetry and prose. Yet, in Brewitt-Taylor's translations, he ensures that the meaning of the poems is understood, even if it involves making significant changes to some of them. This approach allows him to present readers with straightforward, coherent, and comprehensible content. By lowering the barrier to reading ancient poetry and prose, Brewitt-Taylor's revisions have made them more accessible and highly readable, benefiting many readers. Moreover, his translations successfully integrate sound, form, and meaning to a large extent, achieving a harmonious combination of these three elements.

Both translations, each with its unique focus, have greatly enriched the portrayal of Liu Bei in the original poem. Liu Bei's image, as depicted, embodies exceptional character, virtuous leadership, and an imposing presence. By emphasizing different aspects, the translations enhance the concrete and multi-faceted nature of Liu Bei's image.

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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