



Analyzing the Contextualization of English Translations of Sanguo Yanyi: Exploring the Portrayal of Liu Bei's Image through Translation

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ABSTRACT

Sanguo Yanyi, as an original Chinese episodic novel, has captivated numerous readers with its grand narrative, formidable characters, and gripping portrayal of war. Not only has this epic tale gained immense popularity within China, but it has also crossed borders and been translated into English in three distinct versions. The first translation, undertaken by C.H. Brewitt-Taylor in 1925, was shaped by the specific historical and cultural context of its time. This was followed by Moss Roberts' translation in 1991, and most recently, Yu Sumei's in 2014. Each translation bears its own unique characteristics influenced by their respective historical and cultural backgrounds. Through a combined quantitative and qualitative approach, this research delves into the translation of Liu Bei's image as a case study, aiming to explore the impact of historical and cultural contexts on the English adaptation of Sanguo Yanyi. The findings of this study will not only contribute to a deeper understanding of the dissemination and representation of Chinese culture but also provide valuable insights for future endeavours within this field.

Keywords: *Sanguo Yanyi*, English translations, Liu Bei's image, quantitative and qualitative combined approach, contextualization

1. Introduction

Sanguo Yanyi is an enduring masterpiece that has had a profound influence on society in China. It has been highly praised by foreign scholars as a work that truly enriches the character of people and has gained popularity worldwide. In its journey to be embraced by foreign readers, Sanguo Yanyi has undergone nearly 200 years of translation history and has been translated by more than 20 translators, resulting in three complete translations. These translations include C.H. Brewitt-Taylor's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, published in 1925; Moss Roberts' *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel*, published in 1991; and Yu Sumei's translation, *The Three Kingdoms*, published in 2014.

The contextualization of translations is a pivotal approach in translation exploration, significantly enhancing the understanding of novels, comprehension of translation strategies, and providing valuable insights into the translator's thoughts. These three translations were produced in varying time periods, by translators with different backgrounds, societal influences, and perspectives, resulting in distinct characteristics within each translation. This research paper aims to establish a small corpus, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods to study the historical and cultural background, reconstruct the contextual aspects of the three translations, and analyze the divergent character portrayals across different historical conditions. Furthermore, this paper will investigate the reasons underlying the stylistic variations within the different English versions, and elucidate the influence of historical and cultural contexts on translation practice. Ultimately, the goal is to provide valuable insights that contribute to the global promotion and understanding of Chinese culture.

2. Research Design

This research focuses on the portrayal of Liu Bei in the novel Sanguo Yanyi, examining how his image is depicted across three different English translations. A corpus is established to collect the portrayal of Liu Bei's image in the original source text and the three English translations. The translation strategies and methods employed by different translators are then compared to identify any discrepancies among the translations. Furthermore, the study explores the underlying reasons for these disparities by reconstructing the historical and cultural contexts surrounding each translation. This

analysis encompasses an examination of the translators' cultural backgrounds, and the social environment during the translation period. The ultimate objective is to gain insight into the impact of historical and cultural factors on the English translations of Sanguo Yanyi. The findings of this study shed light on the importance of considering historical and cultural context in translation work and cross-cultural communication.

3. Translation Strategies and Methods

The portrayal of Liu Bei in the novel mainly focuses on four aspects: appearance, personality, military prowess, and others' evaluations. By analyzing the translation strategies and methods used in the typical descriptions of these aspects, we first compare the distinct features of three translated versions at a micro level.

(1) Source Text: 扬鞭大骂：“反国逆贼，何不早降！” (Chapter 1, p. 31)

Brewitt-Taylor's: flourishing his whip, began to hurl reproaches at the rebels and called upon them to surrender. (p.16)

Roberts': Raising his whip, Xuande cried out, "Traitors to the Emperor, surrender now!" (Chapter 1, p. 24)

Yu's: flashing his whip, began to hurl reproaches at the rebels and called upon them to surrender (Chapter 1, p.16)

To compare the translation of the phrase "反国逆贼" (fan guo ni zei), Brewitt-Taylor's and Yu's translations both render it as "rebels," while Roberts translates it as "traitors to the Emperor." The three translations all reflect the original author's criticism of the rebels and the authors' support for the orthodoxy of the Han Dynasty. However, both Brewitt-Taylor and Yu do not include the translation of "国"(guo) which means "the state," whereas Roberts translates it as "the Emperor." Roberts' translation highlights the supreme authority of the emperor in the feudal society, symbolizing the state. Liu Bei's right to call other rebels "traitors to the Emperor" demonstrates the importance placed on clan etiquette in the feudal dynasty. This aspect helps readers better understand Liu Bei's motivations to fight for the founding of the state of Shu under the banner of supporting the Han Dynasty. Roberts' translation, therefore, reveals more about Chinese culture.

(2) Source Text: 圣人云：自古皆有死，人无信不立。 (Chapter 11, p.111)

Brewitt-Taylor's: The wise one said, "Death is common to all: the man without truth cannot maintain himself." (Chapter 11, p. 133)

Roberts': As the sage has said, "Death comes to all men, but one who does not keep his word will fall." (Chapter 11, p.141)

Yu's: A saint once said, "All men must die but he who is without faith cannot maintain himself." (Chapter 11, p. 221)

The Chinese term "信" (xin) has a rich and multifaceted meaning in Chinese culture, encompassing trustworthiness, reliability, faith, and loyalty. Brewitt-Taylor's translation of "信" (xin) as "truth" can be seen as an attempt to capture the general concept of trustworthiness and honesty. However, while "truth" may convey some of these meanings, it may not fully capture the depth and cultural nuances of "信" (xin), particularly the notions of loyalty and the relational aspect of trust that are inherent in the

term. Yu's translation places emphasis on integrity but opts for the term "faith" to reflect a broader cultural and moral value system. This translation strategy may resonate more with contemporary Western readers, as they may relate "faith" to trustworthiness within a broader societal context.

On the other hand, Roberts' translation reflects the influence of Confucian values and the hierarchical social structure of the Han Dynasty with the choice of terms like "keep his word" and "fall." This translation emphasizes the importance of integrity and the consequences of violating social norms within that specific historical context. Similarly, In general, Roberts' translation better reflects the nuances of Chinese culture and conveys a greater sense of cultural alienation.

(3) Source Text: 玄德也防曹操谋害，就下处后园种菜，亲自浇灌，以为韬晦之计。(p. 202, Chapter 21)

Brewitt-Taylor's: Now in order to put Ts'ao Ts'ao quite off the scent that any plot against him was in progress, Liu Pei began to devote himself to gardening, planting vegetables and watering them with his own hands. (p.255)

Roberts': To avoid arousing Cao Cao's suspicions, Xuande took to his back garden, planting and tending vegetables, keeping his purposes hidden. (p.262)

Yu's: In the meantime, Liu Bei, in order to guard against possible attacks from Cao Cao, began to devote himself to gardening, planting vegetables, and watering them with his own hands. (pp.432-433)

Among the translators, Taylor and Yu Sumei choose to omit the phrase "以为韬晦之计"(yiwei taohui zhi ji) directly. Instead, they employ phrases such as "put Ts'ao Ts'ao quite off the scent that any plot against him" and "guard against possible attacks" to explain why Liu Bei began planting vegetables. Although this approach offers a more concise writing style, it may not adequately convey Liu Bei's profound vision and might hinder Western readers from understanding the true purpose behind Liu Bei's actions.

As an East Asian Research Institute professor, Roberts translates the idiom as "keeping his purposes hidden," thus emphasizing Liu Bei's cleverness and wisdom. Furthermore, in terms of name translations, Taylor retranslates "Cao Cao" and "Liu Bei" as "Ts'ao Ts'ao" and "Liu Pei," while Roberts chooses to retain the original names "Xuande" and "Cao Cao" respectively. Yu Sumei, being Chinese, translates "Xuande" as "Liu Bei," which aligns more with modern Chinese usage habits. These divergent approaches to name translation reflect the influence of cultural backgrounds.

(4) Source Text: 玄德叹曰：“诸君皆有王佐之才，不幸跟随刘备。(pp.296, Chapter 31)

Brewitt-Taylor's: Yuan-te addressed his faithful followers, saying, "All you, fair Sirs, have talents fitting you to be advisers to a monarch, but your destiny has led you to follow poor me. (p.381)

Roberts': Then Xuande addressed his followers. "Good friends," he said sadly, "you are men with the talent to serve a king. Alas, following one whose fate is sealed has brought you only grief. (p.383)

Yu's: Liu Bei addressed his faithful followers with a deep sigh: "All of you have talents to be major advisors to a monarch, but your destiny has led you to follow my poor self. (p.647-648)

The original text primarily expresses Liu Bei's self-critical introspection, as he believes that his

own shortcomings hinder these talented individuals from pursuing their ambitions. Regarding the translation of the verb "叹"(tan), Brewitt-Taylor excludes it entirely, Roberts conveys it through the phrase "said sadly," while Yu's version acknowledges this detail and expresses it as "a deep sigh." Brewitt-Taylor's translation misses the explicit portrayal of Liu Bei's sadness, whereas both Roberts and Yu incorporate Liu Bei's melancholic demeanour successfully.

The term "诸君"(Zhujun) carries a classical Chinese hue, referring to the entire audience or those present. Brewitt-Taylor adopts a strategy of naturalization and translates it as "sir," a term closely associated with the English language. However, "sir" is typically used in English as an honorific for unknown males. Roberts translates it as "good friends" to reflect Liu Bei's benevolence. Yu Sumei translates it as "all of you" to specifically address "Zhujun," which is more adjusted to contemporary norms.

From the aforementioned examples, it is evident that Brewitt-Taylor's translation employs a domesticating approach, whereas Roberts' translation effectively captures the profound cultural connotations and values of the original text. On the other hand, Yu's translation showcases a perspective that resonates with contemporary readers.

4. Contextualization of the Three Translations

Brewitt-Taylor, a British individual, was first exposed to the Chinese language while studying at the Royal Naval College in Greenwich. It was during this time that he had the opportunity to interact with a group of Chinese teachers and students who were studying advanced Western technology. Intrigued by the language and culture, Brewitt-Taylor developed a keen interest in China and decided to explore it further. In October 1880, he ventured to China and began working at the Foochow Arsenal. At the time of Brewitt-Taylor's arrival, China's national strength was relatively weak, and it faced frequent invasions by foreign powers, resulting in its low international standing. Consequently, Western society held a deep prejudice against Chinese culture. While classical texts such as the *Sishu* (Four Books) and *Wujing* (Five Classics) were highly regarded within China, historical romances did not enjoy official recognition. Brewitt-Taylor's decision to translate Chinese texts was primarily motivated by his personal interest in the subject. The publisher of his translation was a British company, which further facilitated the dissemination of his work.

Roberts, an American professor in the Department of East Asian Studies at New York University, had extensive knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture, having dedicated a significant amount of time to studying East Asian languages and cultures. During this period, the West, influenced by post-colonialism and pluralistic culture, exhibited a more receptive and inclusive attitude towards Chinese culture. Concurrently, China was undergoing a period of reform and opening up, actively seeking cultural exchanges with the outside world to enhance its international influence. Throughout the translation process, Roberts received professional support from foreign language presses, which greatly improved the quality of his translations. In order to maintain the authenticity of the original works, Roberts employed a foreignization strategy. This involved providing readers with a comprehensive list of major events, administrative divisions, and significant battle maps, thereby conveying a wealth of Chinese cultural elements.

Overall, Yu Sumi, a Chinese professor in the English Department of East China Normal

University, possessed a unique advantage in translating *Sanguo Yanyi* due to her native Chinese fluency, providing her with a deeper understanding of the text compared to other translators. With China's remarkable growth in national strength and increased international influence in the 21st century, the nation has become more confident in its cultural identity. In its efforts to engage in cultural exchanges with foreign countries, China has prioritized the promotion of its culture abroad, emphasizing a policy of "localization" to enhance the international influence of Chinese culture. Recognizing the importance of cultural translation and dissemination, Yu Sumi enthusiastically embraced the method of foreignization, drawing inspiration from other translators. By employing this approach, she effectively conveyed the essence of *Sanguo Yanyi* to an international audience while maintaining the authenticity and distinctiveness of Chinese culture.

5. Conclusion

Brewitt-Taylor adopted a simplified approach in his translations, focusing on brevity and clarity to ensure the text could be easily comprehended and accepted by the target readers. His intention was to create translations that were accessible and appealing to a wider audience. Roberts played a significant role in fostering cultural understanding and fostering connections between China and the West, utilizing his translations as a bridge to facilitate meaningful exchanges and promote appreciation of Chinese culture. His translations acted as a conduit for cross-cultural communication, enabling Western readers to engage with and understand Chinese literature and traditions. Similarly, Yu Sumi, a renowned Chinese professor, made invaluable contributions to the promotion of cultural understanding and the global recognition of Chinese culture. Through her translations, she not only amplified the presence of Chinese cultural expression on the international stage but also actively facilitated cultural exchanges. Yu Sumi's work exemplified China's growing confidence and commitment to cultural dialogues, playing a vital role in the expansion and deepening of cultural understanding between China and other nations.

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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