Study on the Overseas Reader Reviews of English Translation of Sanguo Yanyi

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ABSTRACT

Reader evaluation is a key step in measuring the effectiveness of literary translations. A thorough investigation of the reception of Chinese classical novels among overseas readers can help us understand Western readers' acceptance, value judgments, and preferences regarding these works. This study aims to assess the translation quality and value of the English version of *Sanguo Yanyi* by Yu Sumei. By collecting reader reviews from platforms such as Amazon and Goodreads, we employ KHCoder text analysis software to generate visualizations that analyze reader feedback. The results indicate that several main factors influence reader evaluations of this translation, including translation quality, English language experience, narrative coherence, and overall reading experience. Therefore, Chinese translators should comprehensively consider the needs and reading habits of overseas readers when translating classical Chinese novels.

Keywords: Sanguo Yanyi; English translation; reader reviews; KHCoder; Visualization

1. Introduction

Yu Sumei dedicated considerable effort to produce an English version of *Sanguo Yanyi* in 2014, which is the first complete English translation of the 120-chapter novel done by a Chinese translator. Her unique and insightful translation approach vividly re-presents this "cross-era, cross-ethnic, and transnational" masterpiece to a broad audience, contributing to the advancement of Chinese classic and culture to English audience and promoting the larger international outreach of Chinese culture. The English translation of *Sanguo Yanyi* by Yu Sumei, as an outstanding representative of the English translation of Chinese classical literature, has long garnered attention and affection from overseas readers. Through analyzing reader evaluations, we hope to uncover the unique aspects and existing issues of this translation while exploring the underlying reasons for these evaluations. This will aid us in better promoting Chinese classical literature and enhancing overseas readers' understanding and interest in Chinese culture.

By analyzing the overseas reader evaluations of Yu Sumei's English translation of *Sanguo Yanyi*, we can gain insights into how foreign readers perceive and accept Chinese classical literature, as well as their expectations and feedback regarding the translation. This understanding will help us improve translation strategies, enhance the quality and impact of the translations, and further promote the dissemination and acceptance of classical Chinese literature in international markets. Additionally, this study will provide valuable references for the English translations of other Chinese literary works.

2. Research Design

2.1 Data Sources

Some scholars have pointed out that "the role of readers in literary translation is often overlooked... Only through readers' acceptance can literary translations achieve their goals of cultural exchange and exert their impact and effects." (Xie, 2013, p.127) Overseas reader reviews are an important indicator of the effectiveness of translated works, as book reviews directly reflect readers' mentalities and aesthetic judgments in engaging with foreign literature.

This study selects Amazon and Goodreads as primary data sources, systematically collecting and processing reader comments. During the data collection phase, we gathered reviews of the

English translation of *Sanguo Yanyi* from both platforms. After screening and organizing the data, we successfully collected 44 reviews from Amazon and 84 reviews from Goodreads, resulting in a total of 128 reviews. In the data preprocessing phase, we carefully checked and filtered the collected review data, ultimately retaining 125 valid reviews after excluding 3 non-English comments.
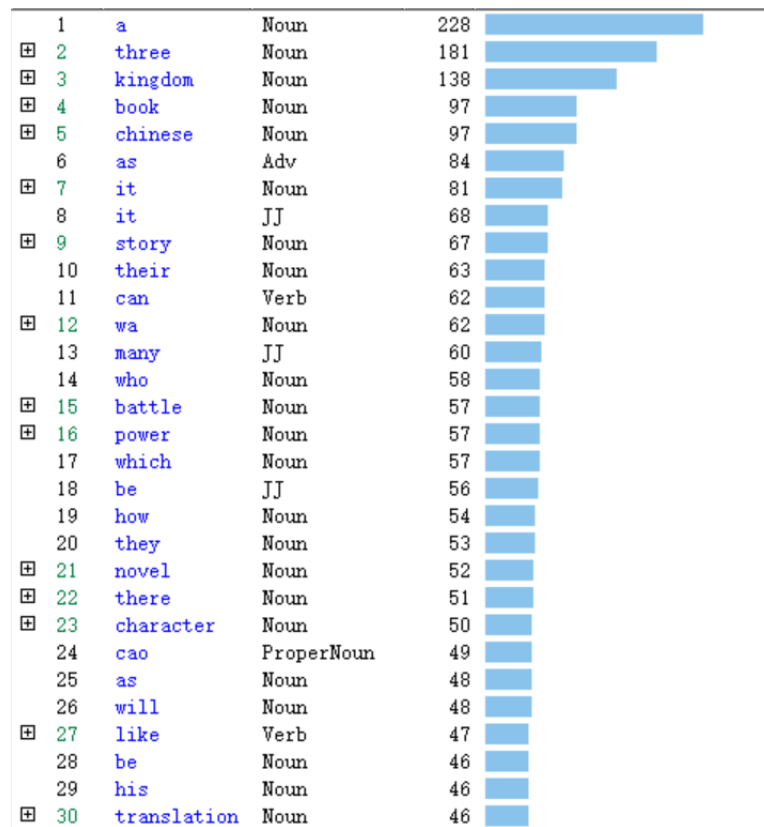
2.2 Data Collection Tool

In this study, we used the Octopus Gatherer to automatically scrape reader comment pages regarding Yu Sumei's English translation of *Sanguo Yanyi* from Amazon and Goodreads. As the collected data may contain duplicates or irrelevant information, we conducted de-duplication and trimming operations to ensure the quality of the final analysis data. The cleaned and reduced reader comment text data was then exported and saved in an Excel spreadsheet for subsequent data analysis.

2.3 Data Analysis Tool

This research employs the KHCoder text analysis tool to conduct an in-depth analysis of overseas reader evaluations of Yu Sumei's English translation of *Sanguo yanyi*, aiming to understand readers' acceptance and emotional attitudes toward this translation. Using KHCoder's word frequency list and co-occurrence network functions, we plan to extract high-frequency vocabulary and correlation patterns from reader reviews, thereby revealing readers' overall impressions, focal points, and feedback regarding this translation.

3. High-Frequency Words Analysis

The collected and organized review data was compiled into an Excel spreadsheet and saved. Following this, the KHCoder text analysis tool was launched to create a new project and import the saved spreadsheet file. In KHCoder, we first performed data preprocessing steps to ensure the quality and accuracy of the data. After the data processing was completed, we utilized the vocabulary extraction feature in the toolbar to generate a word frequency list. Figure 1 presents the data visualization obtained from this process. For easier analysis and reference, we also converted the word frequency list into tabular form (as shown in Table 1) to facilitate further data analysis and exploration.

	1	a	Noun	228	
⊞	2	three	Noun	181	
⊞	3	kingdom	Noun	138	
⊞	4	book	Noun	97	
⊞	5	chinese	Noun	97	
	6	as	Adv	84	
⊞	7	it	Noun	81	
	8	it	JJ	68	
⊞	9	story	Noun	67	
	10	their	Noun	63	
	11	can	Verb	62	
⊞	12	wa	Noun	62	
	13	many	JJ	60	
	14	who	Noun	58	
⊞	15	battle	Noun	57	
⊞	16	power	Noun	57	
	17	which	Noun	57	
	18	be	JJ	56	
	19	how	Noun	54	
	20	they	Noun	53	
⊞	21	novel	Noun	52	
⊞	22	there	Noun	51	
⊞	23	character	Noun	50	
	24	cao	ProperNoun	49	
	25	as	Noun	48	
	26	will	Noun	48	
⊞	27	like	Verb	47	
	28	be	Noun	46	
	29	his	Noun	46	
⊞	30	translation	Noun	46	

Figure 1: High-Frequency Words Map of Reader Reviews on Yu Sumei's Translation of *Sanguo yanyi*

Serial Number	Number of Times	Frequency	Serial Number	Number of Times	Frequency
1	a	228	16	power	57
2	three	181	17	which	57
3	kingdom	138	18	be	56
4	book	97	19	how	54
5	Chinese	97	20	they	53
6	as	84	21	novel	52
7	it	149	22	there	51
8	it	68	23	character	50
9	story	67	24	cao	49
10	their	63	25	as	48
11	can	62	26	will	48
12	was	62	27	like	47
13	many	60	28	be	46
14	who	58	29	his	46
15	battle	57	30	translation	46

Table 1: High-Frequency Words List of Reader Reviews on Yu Sumei's Translation of Sanguo yanyi

After filtering and retaining high-frequency and significant words from the table, we can analyze readers' attitudes and needs as follows:

Readers mainly focus on topics related to the theme of "Three Kingdoms," including its characters, the real historical background, war strategies, power struggles, lessons learned from the book, and evaluations of the translation.

Most readers mention the portrayal of wars and battles, an in-depth concern for war management, and an emphasis on the importance of strategy and tactics. Some comments highlight the complex relationships between rulers and advisors in the novel, as well as the richness of its numerous characters. In evaluating Yu's translation, some readers noted that it is concise and straightforward, but sometimes omits certain details, such as the names of minor characters. This omission somewhat affects readers' understanding of character continuity and the story as a whole. In contrast, Moss Roberts' translation is perceived as more complete, including many details without omissions and providing extensive footnotes that include historical context and terminology explanations. However, there are also readers who regard Yu's version as "an excellent translation of this classic."

4. Semantic Graph Analysis

This study compiled the collected and organized comment data into an Excel spreadsheet, which was then saved. Subsequently, the KH Coder text analysis tool was initiated to create a new project and import the previously saved spreadsheet file. In KHCoder, we first executed data preprocessing steps to ensure data quality and accuracy. Once the data processing was complete, we utilized the vocabulary extraction feature in the toolbar to generate a co-occurrence network graph. Figure 2 presents the intuitive data visualization obtained from this process. Through observation and analysis, we summarized the High-Frequency Words into four major clusters, naming each cluster and compiling them into a chart (as shown in Table 2) for further data analysis and exploration.
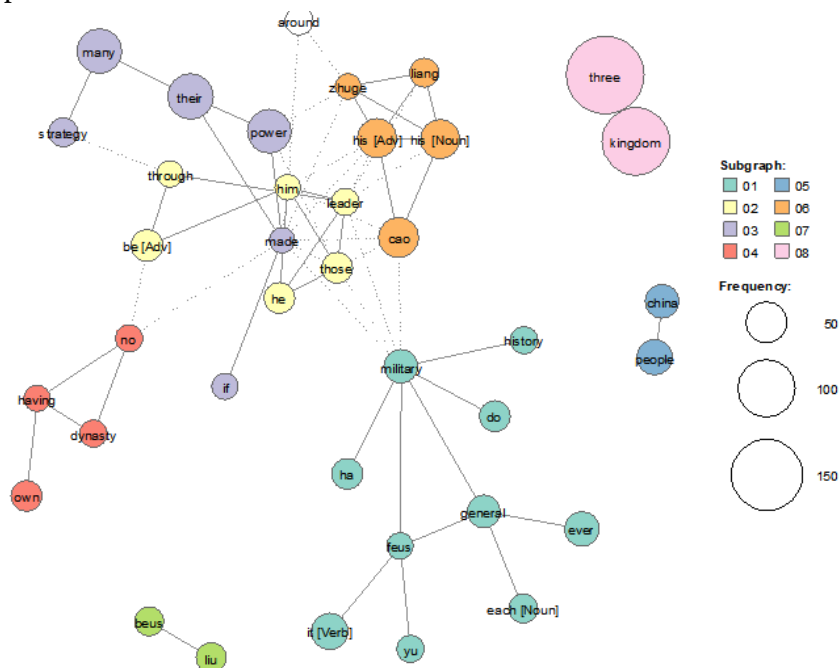

Figure 2: Semantic Network of Reader Reviews on Yu Sumei's Translation of Sanguo Yanyi

Table 2: Semantic Clusters of Reader Reviews on Yu Sumei's Translation of Sanguo yanyi

Serial Number	Cluster Name	Major High-Frequency Words
1	Character	Liu bei, Cao cao, Guan yu, Zhuge liang, Zhang fei
2	Story	Military, strategy, power, leader, three kingdom, own, generals
3	Historical Background	Dynasty, history, china
4	Readers' point of view	Ever, many

After analyzing the semantic network, we can observe the focal points and emotional tendencies in overseas readers' evaluations of *Sanguo Yanyi*. The content of reader evaluations primarily includes major characters, described wars and strategies, the historical background of the novel, and readers' own emotions and insights.

Readers show a high level of attention to the main characters in *Sanguo Yanyi*, each of whom possesses unique personality traits and behaviors in the original work, resulting in well-rounded and complex character portrayals. Simultaneously, readers express enthusiasm for the described war scenes and strategic applications, indicating a strong interest in ancient warfare, military wisdom, and power struggles. Readers also delve deeply into the historical context reflected in the novel, gaining insights into ancient Chinese history, culture, and societal aspects. Throughout the reading process, many readers are emotionally moved by the fates of the characters and the unfolding of the story, deeply resonating with the historical vicissitudes and the joys and sorrows of the characters. These emotions and insights not only reflect readers' profound understanding of *Sanguo Yanyi*, but also showcase their deep consideration of history and culture.

5. Discussion

This article selects reader reviews of Yu's English translation of *Sanguo Yanyi* from platforms like Amazon and Goodreads. It employs The Octopus Gatherer for review extraction and uses KHCoder for analysis of sentences and words. The analysis reveals several factors affecting overseas readers' evaluations of Chinese classical novels: the translator's style, translation quality, cultural differences, marketing and promotion in foreign markets, and the dissemination of related derivative works. Due to cultural discrepancies and a lack of understanding of the historical context and Chinese culture, along with the translator's neglect of these details, readers often face challenges while reading. However, the study finds that a significant number of overseas readers show a positive willingness to engage with Chinese classical novels, with many developing an interest in the original text through adaptations in films, dramas, and games.

In summary, Yu's translation serves as a concise and clear reading option, involving some omissions and edits to align better with English readers' reading habits. This approach does enhance readability and comprehension, especially for those unfamiliar with Chinese cultural contexts, thereby mitigating confusion stemming from the large cast of characters. However, this method also introduces certain issues. Omitting details that may seem unimportant to Chinese readers might compromise character continuity and narrative completeness, leading to confusion among overseas readers. This is particularly true concerning character relationships, motivations, and story development, where these omitted details might be crucial for

understanding the plot. Additionally, the repetitive nature of Chinese surnames can further complicate readers' comprehension of the narrative. If these aspects are not considered adequately during translation, it may lead to misunderstandings regarding character relations. Therefore, meticulous handling of such details is necessary to ensure the integrity and coherence of the story.

The concept of native language advantage has always been an important principle in the Western translation field. In China, while the translation community acknowledges the native language advantage, in practice, whether in the "translation world" or "translation China", the task largely falls on Chinese translators' shoulders. In recent years, as the demand for Chinese culture to "go global" continues to grow, an increasing number of literary works are being translated and introduced internationally, leading to a growing focus on the research of native language advantages within academia.

Chinese cultural classics are treasures of the Chinese civilization spanning thousands of years and are part of the world's shared cultural heritage. With the implementation of the "going out" strategy for Chinese culture and various cultural translation projects, more cultural classics translated by domestic translators are gradually making their way abroad. Regarding the reception of these English translations, some scholars argue that their effectiveness is minimal, and the actual impact is not ideal. Others point out that current translations represented by the *Great Chinese Library* are essentially "self-entertainment" and have not genuinely reached Western readers. Is this really the case? The quality of translated texts cannot be measured solely by evaluations from our own scholars. Determining what is good or bad requires objective standards and data. After a translation is published, peer professional evaluations have a direct role in promoting its acceptance and dissemination. The number of reprints, revisions, and references by Western scholars is also an important reference for assessing the effectiveness of these translations in the overseas market.

It has traditionally been believed that quality translation can only be guaranteed when foreign languages are "translated into" one's native language. According to this view, only foreign translators proficient in Chinese can undertake the translation of Chinese classics; however, such talent is scarce compared to the enormous demand for Chinese culture to "go global." Compared to foreign translators, Chinese translators, who have a deeper understanding and higher recognition of Chinese culture, are set to become the main force in cultural translation abroad. It is an inevitable trend and a responsibility for Chinese translators to take on the tasks of "translating out".

Overall, when translating Chinese classical novels, Chinese translators need to strive for clarity while also paying greater attention to maintaining the integrity and coherence of the story. During the translation process, it is essential to retain those details that are crucial for understanding the narrative to avoid confusing readers. Additionally, elements related to the Chinese cultural background should be appropriately explained and clarified to help readers better grasp the cultural significance behind the stories. Through the analysis of reader evaluations, insights into Western readers' acceptance intentions, value judgments, and preferences towards Chinese philosophical texts can be gained. Therefore, in order to effectively promote Chinese culture through translation, it is important not only to conduct in-depth research from linguistic and cultural perspectives but also to comprehensively consider the needs

of overseas readers and make targeted adjustments and optimizations. Furthermore, this effort should contribute to advancing the "going out" of Chinese culture, enhancing the international community's awareness of it, driving the internationalization of the cultural industry, and promoting the prosperity and development of the cultural sector.

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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