

A Comparative Study of Image Translation of Zhuge Liang in English Versions of *Sanguo Yanyi*

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Abstract:

Sanguo yanyi is one of the Four Masterworks of the Ming and Qing Novels and represents the highest achievement of historical novels in China. Up to this day, there are three full-fledged English translations of *Sanguo yanyi*, spanning nearly a hundred years from 1925 to 2014. Literary images of the characters in the novel represent part of Chinese cultural values and are able to contribute to mutual understanding between China and English-speaking countries. This paper takes the translation of images of Zhuge Liang as an example to reveal the different images constructed in the three translations.

Keywords:

Sanguo Yanyi, English Translation, Image of Zhuge Liang

1. Introduction

Translation, especially literary translation, is a language conversion activity on the surface, but it is actually a cross-cultural communication activity^[1]. In literary works, we mostly focus on creating character images, promoting the development of the story and revealing the main thrust of the stories through what the characters do, think, and want in the book. *Sanguo yanyi* portrays many distinctive characters, vividly embodying the virtues of loyalty, righteousness, and benevolence advocated by the Chinese nation. Among them, Zhuge Liang is a loyal minister and with wisdom and military talent, and also a typical character created by Luo Guanzhong. The novel covers a total of 120 chapters, and Zhuge Liang was mentioned from the Chapter 36 until his death Chapter 104, occupying over half of the entire text.

There are three complete English versions of *Sanguo yanyi*. The earliest translation was *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* translated by the British sinologist C. H. Brewitt-Taylor (hereinafter referred to as Brewitt-Taylor's translation). It was published by Shanghai: Kelly&Walsh in 1925, and republished by Tuttle Publishing in 1959, 1970 and 2002. The second one is translated by the American sinologist Moss Roberts titled *A Historical Novels of Three Kingdoms* (hereinafter referred to as

Roberts' translation). It was published and printed in the United States by the University of California Press in 1991, and published jointly by the Foreign Language Press (FLP) and the University of California Press (UCP) in 1994. The latest one is titled *The Three Kingdoms* translated by Professor Yu Sumei from East China Normal University (hereinafter referred to as the Yu's translation). It was firstly published by Tuttle Publishing in 2014, and republished in Chinese and English languages by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press in 2017.

This article takes the translation concerning images of Zhuge Liang as an example to conduct a comparative study and analyze the different images produced in the three translations.

2. Comparative Analysis of Zhuge Liang's Image Construction

The three translations are all based on the version annotated by Mao Lun and Mao Zonggang, which makes them comparable. The source text of this study is the Mao version first printed by the People's Literature Press in 1953 and reprinted in 2021. Brewitt-Taylor's translation is the 2002 version printed by Tuttle Publishing, Roberts' translation the 1994 version jointly published by FLP and UCP, while Yu's translation is the 2014 version by Tuttle Publishing. According to the author's observation and statistics drawn from a self-established small-sized parallel corpus, Zhuge Liang's image is mainly reflected in three dimensions: appearance, personality, and military talent. This article will focus on typical examples in these aspects to conduct a qualitative analysis of the images constructed in the three translations.

2.1. Appearance Description

In *Sanguo yanyi*, Zhuge Liang mostly appears as an image of “头戴纶巾”, “身穿袍服”, “身長八尺, 容貌甚伟”, demonstrating as a tall and graceful man^[2]. One of the typical examples is as follows:

(1) 孔明纶巾羽扇, 身衣道袍, 端坐于车中。(Chapter 90:808)

Brewitt-Taylor: K'ung-ming, dressed in the simple robe of a Taoist, went out in his light chariot. (Chapter 90:1062)

Roberts: Kongming, wearing his headband and Taoist robes, sat erect in his carriage, holding a feathered fan. (Chapter 90:1070)

Yu: Zhuge Liang, dressed in his usual Taoist robe and headdress and carrying his feather fan, went out in his light chariot. (Chapter 90:1851)

This sentence is a description of Zhuge Liang's appearance when he captured Meng Huo in battle. In the source text, Zhuge Liang's appearance is reflected by four phrases “纶巾” (a headband), “羽扇” (a feather fan), “道袍” (a Taoist robe) and “端坐” (sitting erectly). Brewitt-Taylor only briefly introduced Zhuge Liang wears a Taoist robe, and the other three elements are all missing in translation, only expressing the implied meaning that Zhuge Liang is sitting in the carriage planning to leave. Roberts gives a very detailed description of Zhuge Liang's appearance and deportment. Consistent to the source text, all four elements are reflected in the translation. Yu shows Zhuge Liang's appearance at that time in detail and the first three elements are translated, and she also explains the implied meaning of Zhuge Liang's next departure in a chariot, but the deportment of sitting erectly is omitted.

There are other appearance description on Zhuge Liang, including “身長八尺，面如冠玉”，“头戴纶巾，身披鹤氅”，“飘飘然有神仙之慨” (Chapter 38:308). For “身長八尺，面如冠玉”，Brewitt-Taylor translates it as “rather below medium height with a refined face”. In ancient China, the standard height of an adult male is “七尺五寸” (7.5 spans) while “八尺” (8 spans) of Zhuge Liang is higher than average males, so it is a mistake to translate it as “below medium height”. There is a simile here to compare Zhuge Liang’s face to a jade (面如冠玉). The translation of “jade” is missing in Brewitt-Taylor’s translation. “纶巾” is a head dress made of silk, the soft material of which correlated with the description of “飘飘然” (“buoyant air” in Roberts’ translation and “perfect ease” in Yu’s translation). However, the deportment of Zhuge Liang is also missing here in Brewitt-Taylor’s translation.

Roberts translates it as: “Kongming appeared singularly tall, with a face like gleaming jade and a plaited silken band around his head. Cloaked in crane down, he had the buoyant air of a spiritual transcendent.”, which reflected all the elements in the source text accurately. Yu translates it as: “a very superior-looking man, his face was so refined that it resembled jade. He wore a silk head-wrap and a long crane-white gown. He moved with an air of perfect ease so that he seemed to be more like a god than a mortal”. In Yu’s translation, the height of Zhuge Liang is missing, although the other elements are all demonstrated.

Of the three translations regarding appearance description, Roberts employed more literal translation methods to keep the elements of the source text. While as the earliest translation, Brewitt-Taylor employed more of free translation to keep the core meaning of the source text but missed some cultural implications and even miscommunicated some information. Yu’s translation is much improved based on Brewitt-Taylor’s but is not as faithful to the source text as Roberts.

2.2. Personality Implication

In *Sanguo yanyi*, Zhuge Liang’s image concentrates on his characteristics of modesty, prudence, calmness, and. he serves his kingdom and the people, full-heartedly.^[3]

(2) “此是云长想曹操昔日之恩，故意放了。但既有军令状在此，不得不按军法。”遂叱武士推出斩之。(Chapter 50:468)

Brewitt-Taylor: “Then you remembered the old kindness of Ts’ao Ts’ao and so allowed him to escape. But your acceptance of the task with its conditions is here. You will have to suffer the penalty.” He called in the lictors and told them to take away Kuan Yu and put him to death. (Chapter 50:625)

Roberts: “that you purposely released him, mindful of his past generosity. Nonetheless, since you made a formal commitment, we have no choice but to enforce it under martial law.” Kongming shouted for the guards to execute him. (Chapter 50:603)

Yu translation: “In that case you must have intentionally allowed him to escape for his past kindness to you,” said Zhuge Liang. “But since you have signed a written pledge you will have to suffer the penalty.” Then he called in the guards to take Guan Yu out. (Chapter 50:1046)

This is because Guan Yu wanted to return Cao Cao’s favor, and deliberately let Cao Cao go in Huarong Road. Before that, Guan Yu had issued a military order, and if

Cao Cao left Huarong Dao and he released Cao Cao, he would be dealt with according to military law. The sentence "You will have to suffer" in Brewitt-Taylor's and Yu's translations expresses the meaning that Guan Yu has to be punished according to the military criminal code because of letting free leader of the enemy, reflecting Zhuge Liang's iron-faced selflessness and strict following of military code, but the lacking sympathy did not reflect the contradictory feeling of Zhuge Liang to sacrifice a valiant general for the successful execution of military codes. In Roberts' translation, "we have no choice but to..." shows that Guan Yu had to be beheaded because of the military order, which not only reflects the image of Zhuge Liang's strict adherence to military discipline, but also reflects his kindness and perseverance. Through the description of psychological activities, the image of the character becomes more vivid and multi-dimensioned.

2.3. *Military Talent Demonstration*

In *Sanguo yanyi*, Luo Guanzhong vividly shows Zhuge Liang's outstanding military talents, including stories such as "Burning Bowang Slope", "Burning Xinye", "Borrowing Arrows", "Borrowing East Wind", and "Seven Arrests of Meng Huo"^[4]. Although some stories are fictional just as Lu Xun once commented on the image of Zhuge Liang that he was almost described as demons with supernatural power^[5]. Specific examples are as follows:

(3) 汉升虽勇，争奈年老，恐非张郃对手。(Chapter 70:42)

Brewitt-Taylor: "Friend Huang, you are bold enough, but what about your age? I fear you are no match for Chang Ho." (Chapter 70:860)

Roberts: "You are brave enough, but you may be too old to take on Zhang He." (Chapter 70:828)

Yu: "General, you're bold enough, but what about your age? I fear you're no match for Zhang He." (Chapter 70:1451)

This sentence is a statement made by Zhuge Liang to the experienced General Huang Zhong. He wants to motivate Huang Zhong to fight against Zhang He. All the three translations retain direct quotes of the source text. The difference lies in the tone implied in the sentences. Brewitt-Taylor and Yu use the rhetorical question "but what about your age?" to express the meaning that Huang is too old to fight, which put emphasis on the age. Compared to the declarative sentence in Roberts' translation, the use of the modal word "may" reinforces Zhuge Liang's regret that Huang Zhong cannot fight because of his old age, but on the other hand it implies other possibilities that Huang Zhong might beat Zhang He through his bravery. Roberts' translation demonstrates his understanding of the subtlety of the source text. Zhuge Liang's real intention here is to inspire Huang Zhong to take the responsibility, which is also a reflection of famous military strategy of provocation (激将法).

From the perspective of word selecting, both Brewitt-Taylor and Yu use the word "bold" in the translation of "brave", which can be expressed as "courageous" as well as "reckless". Therefore, it is inevitable that foreign readers will truly believe that Zhuge Liang thinks that Huang Zhong is reckless so that he will not designate Huang Zhong the duty. In contrast, the word "brave" used in Roberts' translation is more appropriate. On the whole, Moss Roberts' translation is consistent with the implied meaning of the source text, and thus more faithful and accurate in recreating the images of Zhuge Liang in the target language.

(4) 汝以二人老迈，不能成事。吾料汉中必于此二人手内可得。(Chapter 70:642)

Brewitt-Taylor: “You regard the two as too old and stupid to succeed, but I think the attainment of HanChung depends upon these two.” (Chapter 70:860)

Roberts: “You think they are too advanced in years to do the job?” asked Kongming. “I predict it is they who will bring Hanzhong into our hands.” (Chapter 70:829)

Yu: “You think them too old to succeed, But I’m sure the attainment of Hanzhong depends upon these two.” (Chapter 70:1452)

This is what Zhuge Liang said to the remaining ministers after he inspired Huang Zhong. The three versions all directly translated the source text, but the difference between them is that both Brewitt-Taylor’s and Yu’s translation are declarative sentences, which appear relatively flat. But Roberts’ translation uses a question sentence, strengthening Zhuge Liang’s rhetorical tone and reflecting his trust in Huang Zhong and Yan Yan.

From the perspective of word usage, the translations of “老迈” in the three versions are also different. In Brewitt-Taylor’s translation, “老迈” is translated as “old and stupid”, while “stupid” has the Chinese meaning of “foolish”, which is a derogatory term in Chinese. However, the original intention of Zhuge Liang is not to belittle the two generals, but to objectively state the fact that the two generals have reached an advanced age. Brewitt-Taylor’s translation in this way may cause foreign readers to misunderstand Zhuge Liang’s real intention. In Roberts translation, “老迈” is translated as “advanced in years”, which euphemistically expresses the old age of Huang Zhong but implies the meaning of “experienced”. While Yu directly translated it as “old”, leaving readers to catch the implied meaning by themselves. Roberts brings the implied meaning into the surface and reduces the obstacles for reader to understand the meaning of the source text..

Regarding another sentence, the “料” in the phrase “吾料汉中必于此二人手内可得” can be translated into “anticipate, predict” in Chinese, while the “think” and “predict” used in Brewitt-Taylor’s and Roberts’ translation both have the meaning of “anticipate, predict”, which is closer to the Chinese interpretation. However, regarding the word “sure” used in Yu translation, it has the meaning of “definite”, which shows Zhuge Lian’s absolute trust in Huang Zhong and Yan Yan. Yu seems wins out in this translation.

In addition, the translation of the latter part also varies. In Brewitt-Taylor’s and Yu’s translations, both are translated as “the attachment of Han Chung/Han Zhong depends on these two”, while in Roberts’ translation “it is they who will bring Han Zhong into our hands.” The term “attachment” can be translated as “achieving, obtaining”, which generally conforms to the meaning of capturing the land as expressed in the original text. However, the verb “bring” used in Roberts translation makes the sentence more dynamic and vivid.

3. Conclusions

Brewitt-Taylor translation has some reservations and deletions when translating the image of Zhuge Liang and even has some mistakes. However, as the first and an introductory translator of the masterpiece, he made great contribution in enhancing mutual understanding of China and English-speaking nations. His translation was produced in a social context when China was in an inferior position, so he adopted

more of the target language norms and employed free translation methods to bridge the gap between Chinese culture and English culture, or he omitted part of the source text and source culture to decrease the foreignness of his translation. So the images of Zhuge Liang he constructed in his translation is not only different from the source text in appearance but more flat in personality. In addition, the translator's own understanding of source text and Chinese culture is not sufficient, so there are some deficiencies in the translation. Roberts translation was remarked as a faithful reflection of the source language and culture. He adopted more literal translation methods to keep the structure of the source language, and the implication of source culture. In Roberts translation, subtle emotions are expressed, which are closer to the language habits and character images of Chinese people. The images he created are more vivid and closer to the source text. Yu's translation is ranked between Brewitt-Taylor's and Roberts'. As a native Chinese, she adds her own understanding of the translation, or in other words, adds some interpretations to help the target readers' understanding of the novel itself. She is even more accurate than Roberts in dealing with the tone of the sentences. However, the reduction of some information brings it further from the source text, and the images she constructed are not so comprehensive as that of Roberts. The comparative study of Zhuge Liang's images in these three translations provides a method guidance for English-Chinese translation of images in literary works, that is, more literal translation methods should be employed to convey the vividness of the characters in source text.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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