

A Study on *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*: English Translation and International Reception

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Abstract

The present research is conducted to investigate the current situation of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*' English translation studies and international reception, and work out corresponding strategies for further studies and wider reception. To do this, methods of literature review and close reading of its various translated versions are adopted. The research shows that the existing studies of the novel mainly involves linguistic, cultural and literary aspects, and its international receptions are largely based on text translation, exchange of cultural programs as well as movie production. The research concludes that in order to promote its translation and international reception stress should be equally put on translators (both at home and abroad), source texts (full-length versions, condensed versions and chapter excerpts of the novel), and comprehensive flexible strategies.

Keywords: *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, English translation, international reception

1. Introduction

Romance of the Three Kingdoms, written by Luo Guanzhong in the 14th century, is a Chinese historical novel based on events in the turbulent years near the end of the Han Dynasty and the Three Kingdoms era of China. The story- partly historical and partly legendary- romanticizes and dramatizes the lives of feudal lords and their retainers, who tried to replace the dwindling Han dynasty or restore it. *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is widely regarded as one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature, and enjoys great popularity among readers both at home and abroad. In fact, the novel is among the most beloved works of literature in East Asia, and its literary influence in the region has been compared to that of the works of Shakespeare on English literature. It is arguably the most widely read historical novel in late imperial and modern China.

As for the English translation of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, it has been almost 200 years since the first introduction of the novel into Great Britain by a Britain sinologist Rev. R. Morrison, and the first translation of the chapter "The Death of the Celebrated Minister Tung-Cho" in the novel by Peter Perring Thomas in 1820. Since then, numerous English translators tried to translate full-length version or chapter excerpts of the novel into English, whose translation practice and versions greatly promote the international reception of the novel, and indeed Chinese classics as well. However, compared with the other three Classical Novels of Chinese literature, well-known English versions of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* are still rare, and its influence is still limited (Wen & Li, 2011, pp. 25-30). Therefore, the studies of its translators, source texts and translation strategies is of significance to English translation and international receptions of the novel.

The present research is conducted to identify the current situation of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*' studies, and suggest strategies for its English translation and international receptions. Accordingly, the paper first explores the existing major English versions of the novel so as to provide a panoramic view of its studies and international receptions; then the problems in current studies and translation practice will be explored; finally, strategies are provided to promote its English translation practice/studies and international reception with equal emphasis on translator identity, choice of source texts for translation and readers' response.

2. Literature Review

Translation practice of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* abroad is more desirable, and over 20 translators offer their translations of the novel, or chapter excerpts of the novel, for instance, George Carter Stent, C. H. Brewitt-Taylor, Samuel Wells Williams, Herbert Allen Giles, Francis Lister Hawks Pott, John Clendinning Steele,

Moss Roberts, and etc. However, translation studies of the novel and its international receptions are, in a large sense, ignored in the English-speaking countries, and there are only a few scholars who just briefly introduce the popular English translations of the novel without detailed and systematic studies into those translated versions.

Comparatively, studies into English translation and international receptions of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* remains a hot issue at home, and a large scope of researches have been conducted, but scholars and translators seldom involve in translation practice of the novel. Yu Sumei (who makes a full-length translation of the novel), Yang Zhangxian & Dai Naidie (who work together and translate the chapter “The Battle of Red Cliffs” of the novel into English) are among the few Chinese scholars and translators who participate the translation practice.

Scholars at home made abundant studies of the novel and its international receptions, which involves such aspects as general introduction of the translation history of the novel, studies of the translators, translation strategies, comparative studies of different translated versions, cultural studies of the novel, studies of the literariness of the novel, and linguistic studies of the novel. Among them, the noticeable are Wang Lina and Luo Haihui who introduce, in detail, almost all the translated versions of the novel (including full-length versions, condensed versions and chapter excerpts), and present a route map of the novel’s international receptions, Mei Xinlin&Han Weibiao who make a historic study of the novel in the past 100 years, Xu Duo who investigates the cultural implications of the novel’s English translation, Wen Jun&Li Peijia who, based on the current overall studies of the novel, offer translation strategies, Zhang Yaomin who makes a comparative study of Brewitt-Taylor’s and Roberts’ translated versions of the novel, Hao Xiao who explores the dissemination of the novel from the theory of acceptance, and many others.

However, even though a lot of researches have been done on *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, we can not ignore the fact that the English versions of the novel have not gained wide attention but appear questionable, and its international receptions are far from being satisfactory. (Wang & Du, 2017, pp. 70-85)

3. Discussion

3.1 English Translation Practice of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and the Translators

Romance of the Three Kingdoms has been translated by numerous scholars. It has been almost 200 years since the first introduction of the novel into Great Britain by a Britain sinologist Rev. R.Morrison, and since Peter Perring Thomas first translated the chapter “The Death of the Celebrated Minister Tung-Cho” of the novel in 1820. Then Thomas’ translation practice was followed by Sir John Francis Davis, a British diplomat and sinologist, who translated some poems in the novel, and Samuel Wells Williams, an American missionary and sinologist, who translated the chapter “Oath Taken by Members of the Triad Society” and published it in *Chinese Repository* in 1849, George Cater Stent, another British sinologist, who translated and published “Brief Sketches from the life of Kung-ming” in *The China Review* in 1876, and then followed by other English sinologists such as Herbert Allen Giles, Francis Lister Hawks Pott, Rev. John Clendinning Steele, Frederick Herman Martens, and C. A. Jamieson, who also translated some chapters of the novel .

The first known English translation, which consists of a single chapter excerpt that was distributed in China to students learning English at Presbyterian missionary schools, was made by John G. Steele in 1907. Then Z.Q. Parker published a 1925 translation containing four episodes from the novel, while Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang published excerpts in 1981, including chapters 43–50. Later, a more complete and faithful translation of the novel was published in two volumes by Charles Henry Brewitt-Taylor in 1925, who was a long-time official of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service. The translation was well written, but lacked any supplementary materials such as maps or character lists that would aid Western readers; a 1959 reprint was published that included maps and an introduction by Roy Andrew Miller to assist foreign readers. (Taylor & Francis, 1998, pp. 1221-1222)

In 1976, Moss Roberts published an abridged translation containing one fourth of the novel including maps and more than 40 woodblock illustrations from three Chinese versions of the novel.(Ibid) Roberts’ abridgement is reader-friendly, being written for use in colleges and to be read by the general public.(Ibid) After decades of work, Roberts published a full translation in 1991 complete with an afterword, eleven maps, a list of characters, titles, terms, and offices, and almost 100 pages of notes from Mao Zonggang’s commentaries and other scholarly sources.(Ibid) Roberts’ translation was republished in 1995 by the Foreign Languages Press without the illustrations.

In 1985, Beijing Foreign Languages Press published an unabridged translation of 120 chapters by Cheung Yik-man. In 2014, Tuttle published a new, three-volume translation of the novel, by Yu Sumei, edited by Ronald C. Iverson. According to its publisher, this translation is an unabridged "dynamic translation" intended to be

more readable than past English translations of the novel. Those abridged and unabridged translations help present an overall view of the translation practice of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and sketch a propagation path of the novel.

The English translation practice reveals a few distinctive features of the studies of the novel. The first is occupational diversity of the translators, among which are missionaries, sinologists, educators, company workers, servicemen, diplomats and etc. Their occupations make the studies and translation of Chinese Classics more accessible. But it is noticeable that except a few translators like Roberts, Yang Xianyi, Dai Naidie, and Cheung Yik-man, the other translators do not have professional knowledge and skills of translation, and their translation practice of the novel is largely due to their interest in Chinese literature. In fact, it is the translation practice of Chinese Classics that makes some translators such as H.A.Giles, S.W. Williams and C. Arendt famous sinologists. The publication of Brewitt-Taylor's unabridged translation of the novel in 1925 is a watershed in the history of the translation practice, and personal interest is replaced by a broader sense of literary and cultural motivation. The second is the lack of Chinese translators, and the translation practice is mainly performed by foreign scholars. This phenomenon reflects the truth that the external translation of Chinese Classics at home is disordered and disorganized, and few Chinese translators dedicated to the external translation of Chinese Classics. And lack of Chinese scholars and translators in translation practice of the novel greatly influences the quality of translation, and some cultural and social implications are lost during the translation practice by foreign scholars. In fact, Brewitt-Taylor's and Roberts' unabridged translations of the novel put an end to the large-scale English translation practice of the novel.

3.2 *The Choice of Source Texts for Translation and International reception*

Romance of the Three Kingdoms' international reception and level of acceptance among foreign readers are closely related to the translators' choice of source texts. Among the 28 abridged translations, Chapter 46 of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* published in 1973 by People's Literature Publishing House is selected as source text in 8 abridged translations, Chapter 1, 2, 8, and 43 respectively in 5 abridged translations, and Chapter 3, 4, 7, 48, 49, and 50 respectively in 4 abridged translations. In terms of the materials for translation practice, the first one third of the novel (events before The Battle of Red Cliffs) is preferred, and the translators deliberately select the main characters of the novel, for instance, Tung-cho, K'ung-ming, Ts'ao Ts'ao, Kwan-woo, and etc., and some key events like "Oath Taken by Members of the Triad Society" and "The Battle of Red Cliffs" as the basis for the choice of source texts for translation. This tendency truly reflect the early interest-based motivation of their translation practice. A possible problem is that the focus of the translation practice, very likely, leads to the deficiency of a comprehensive understanding of the novel, and the lack of the events after The Battle of Red Cliff causes misreading/misinterpretation of the novel among readers, which actually degrades the literary value of the novel. Luckily, Brewitt-Taylor's and especially Roberts' unabridged translations improve the completeness and literary value of the novel. Roberts' complete translation remains faithful to the original; it is reliable yet still matches the tone and style of the classic text. Yang Ye, a professor in Chinese Literature at the UC Riverside, wrote in *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation into English* (1998) that Roberts' translation "supersedes Brewitt-Taylor's translation and will no doubt remain the definitive English version for many years to come." (Taylor & Francis, 1998, pp. 1221-1222) However, the studies of the novel and various English versions (especially Roberts' translation) by overseas sinologists, does not bring out popularity and acceptance among western audience, and in fact, the masses and mainstream media know very little about the novel. (Li, 2009, p.32) Obviously, the receptions and acceptance of the novel overseas do not match the improving quality of its English translations.

It is also true that the paratexts and notes of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* has been, more or less, ignored in the translation practice. Paratext is a concept in literary interpretation. The main text of published authors is often surrounded by other material supplied by the authors, editors, printers, and publishers, which is known as the paratext. These added elements form a frame for the main text, and can change the reception of a text or its interpretation by the public. Usually, paratexts include titles, introduction, afterwords, acknowledgments, maps, illustrations, characters, terms, blurbs, and etc., which are, in fact, part of a literary work, and of great importance to the construction of its literary value. Among the translations made from the end of Qing Dynasty to the early Ming Dynasty are mainly adaptations and paraphrases of chapter excerpts instead of unabridged translations, and the translation practice is interest-motivated. Those adaptations and paraphrases are not faithful translation of the novel, which actually degrades the literary value of novel. Paratexts and notes are almost invisible in the adaptations and paraphrases. It is in 1991 that paratexts and notes, for the first time, are included fully in Roberts' translation of the novel, which partly explains why his translation enjoys the greatest popularity among readers both at home and abroad.

3.3 Strategies for Romance of the Three Kingdoms' International receptions

Romance of the Three Kingdoms does not receive due attention overseas just as other Chinese Classics like *A Dream in Red Mansions*, and *Journey to the West*. Part of the reasons is that there are still some problems in the methods of promoting its international receptions, among which is its unbalanced situation of international reception. Since the Ming&Qing Dynasty when *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was first introduced to Japan and South(North) Korea, followed by Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam and Indonesia, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* remains popular among common readers, and scholars as well as researchers of those Asian countries. Comparatively, the level of acceptance and reception effect of the novel among common readers in the western countries is not sufficient. Besides, the cultural connotations of the novel are not fully appreciated.

Accordingly, multiple forms of text translation should be made to improve its international receptions, targeting at different reader groups such as common readers (including children), scholars and researchers, supplemented by other forms of nontext translation, such as cartoons, dramas, songs, movies, cultural programs, TV series and online games. And new media and instant communication tools should also be fully and effectively employed to meet changes in the reading habits of the audience. Besides, the communication subjects of the novel should be further developed. A case in point is that the successful communication of the novel in Japan and South Korea lies in the power of the private sectors including some influential individuals, clubs, and organizations, which presents a distinctive multilevel and ladder-shaped feature with subjects of governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations and individuals. As a result, differential classification of target readers overseas should be highly valued since they are, indeed, essential in investigating the effect of communication, and evaluating the value and significance of communication. (Cheng, 2017, pp. 147-148)

In addition, common values should be established and shared in the international receptions of the novel. One of the most important reasons for the popularity of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in Japan and South Korea is the root culture of Confucianism. Though the characters and plots of the novel are reinterpreted and rebuilt, the common value of heroism and main characters and plots are kept so that cultural differences are bridged and different cultures can mingle with each other. Therefore, such values as harmony between man and nature, kindheartedness and justice, loyalty and tolerance embodied in the novel should be further emphasized. Then, scholars and experts both at home and abroad are encouraged to work jointly for the translation and international reception of the novel. Of course, the source texts include full-length versions, condensed versions and chapter excerpts of the novel.

Finally, proper translation strategies of the novel should be adopted so as to further its international reception. *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is full of words and images of Chinese traditional culture such as “麒麟”, “龙”, and “凤”. Without flexible translation, the meanings and connotations of these words and images cannot be fully transmitted. For example, transliteration, paraphrase, literal translation plus notes, and liberal translation should be more carefully employed, depending on acceptance degree of the target audience so that loyalty to the source text and reader's response are both considered. After all, the relationship between receptor and message should be absolutely the same as that which existed between the original receptor and the message. (Nida & Taber, 2004, p. 25) In this sense, more flexible translation theories and methods could be applied into its translation practice to maintain its messages and cultural connotations.

Example: 庶曰：“以某比之，譬犹弩马并麒麟，寒鸦配鸾凤耳。”

Brewitt-Taylor's version of translation: “With me? Compared with him I am as a worn-out cart-house to a kilin, an old crow to a phoenix.”

Moss Roberts' version of translation: “To Compare him to someone like me, Shan Fu answered, “ would be like comparing the fabled unicorn to a dray, a peafowl to a crow.” A comparison of the two versions would find that Brewitt-Taylor translated “麒麟”, a divine beast in Chinese traditional mythology, as “kilin” by using transliteration as so to introduce this unique cultural image to western readers, while Moss Roberts translated it as unicorn, a beast in western mythology which western people are quite familiar with so that they can better understand the image and the translation. (Zhang, 2017, p. 86) Roberts' translation strategy explains why there are almost 1184 notes and paratexts in his translation version of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

4. Conclusion

Romance of the Three Kingdoms is acclaimed as one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature, and its English translation and international reception deserve more studies since China is the world's longest surviving civilization with the biggest population and impressive social and economic progress nowadays, and the novel is a fascinating read and an invaluable source for both common readers and scholars as it presents an

overview of an evolving and up-to-date multidisciplinary and integrative view of Chinese history and culture, a sparkling part of world history and culture. In this sense, the study of the novel and its translation as well as its international reception is, in fact, an interesting and meaningful attempt to maintain the diversity of world culture.

The present study is conducted to investigate the current situation of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*' English translation studies and international receptions, and work out corresponding strategies for further studies and communication. The study shows that the English translation practice of the novel is characterized by occupational diversity of the translators, among whom Brewitt-Taylor and Moss Roberts are the most successful, and the lack of Chinese translators. Besides, the study also reveals that the receptions and acceptance of the novel overseas are far from satisfactory due to insufficient choice of source texts for translation, and the paratexts and notes of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* has been, more or less, ignored in the translation practice, which, in turn, hinders the studies of the novel and its international reception.

Based on the findings of the study, the paper suggests that text translation be combined with nontext translation, such as cartoons, dramas, songs, movies, cultural programs, TV series and online games so as to improve its international receptions, targeting at different reader groups, and the communication subjects of the novel be further developed with due emphasize on governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations and individuals. Besides, the paper also suggests that common values embodied in the novel be further stressed to remove cultural differences and barriers, and translators and scholars at home and abroad be encouraged to work jointly for the translation and international reception of the novel. Finally, flexible strategies of translation and international receptions are concluded with careful choice among transliteration, paraphrase, literal translation plus notes, and liberal translation according to acceptance degree of the target audience, and the need of cross-cultural communication.

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