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外国语言文学学术论丛

《三国演义》英译本研究： 描述翻译学理论的应用

冯 雷/著

Two English
Translations of the Chinese Epic
Novel *Sanguo Yanyi*:
A Descriptive Study



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理论的应用

冯 雷 著

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Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Chinese culture and Western culture differ greatly from each other. It is well known that a good understanding of some aspects of a certain culture can undoubtedly facilitate the mastery of a specific language. Furthermore, the Chinese language is very different from English and most of the other European languages in a number of ways. Compared to more than 400 million Chinese learners of English,^[1] there are only forty million foreign learners of Chinese^[2] around the world, although this number is increasing fast as China is beginning to play an increasingly important role globally. Chinese books and newspaper articles are written in Chinese characters, which are different from the Roman alphabet, and Westerners who are used to reading Romanized script find Chinese characters difficult to master. It usually takes longer for Western learners of Chinese to learn to read Chinese than for Chinese learners to learn to read English.

[1] www.bj.chinanews.com/news/2010/0312/6753.html. Retrieved on 2 September 2011.

[2] www.chinese.people.com.cn/GB/13471561.html. Retrieved on 2 September 2011.

In some European countries, where citizens have had contact with China through Christian missionaries for centuries, Chinese studies and studies related to China are not new fields of research or interest. In the United States of America, the development of Chinese studies has accelerated in the second half of the twentieth century, and in some fields Americans have surpassed Europeans in research on China (cf. Yu 1997). Various academic institutions offering courses in Chinese studies have in fact been established in the United States, of which the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University and the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Columbia University are among the most famous.

As the Chinese writing system^[1] is fundamentally different from that of most Western languages, difficulties arise for Western learners of Chinese. Very few undergraduate students who have studied Chinese for two or three years are able to read Chinese newspaper articles, let alone Chinese books. Most of the Westerners who are interested in China and wish to learn more about the country and culture have to read English translations of Chinese books or English articles written by researchers on China. Trustworthy translations are therefore immensely important, since they can give readers insight into the source text (hereafter ST) as well as into some of the cultural and historical customs and morals of the source culture.

The Chinese civilization has a history of over 3,000 years, which has left the world with a great number of valuable classics. It is estimated that the number of Chinese classics produced before 1911^[2] was between 80,000 and 100,000. In 2008, the first list of Chinese classics was announced after it had been approved by the State Council. The list included 2,392 books,

[1] Chinese language is recorded in the form of characters, i.e. ideographs. There are about 1,500 to 2,000 commonly-used characters, though the total number can be as many as 50,000. Even native speakers of Chinese, when they start to receive education, have to devote great effort and time to learning to recognize and write out the characters correctly.

[2] The year 1911 marks the end of the last Chinese feudal empire.

of which 2,282 were written in Chinese characters and 110 in languages of different minority groups in China. According to a survey, during the one hundred years of the last century, nearly 100,000 Western classics were translated into Chinese, but the number of Chinese classics that were translated into Western languages was only 500 (Wang & Wang 2009: 2). This unbalanced situation suggests that more Chinese books are waiting to be translated and that more qualified translators need to be trained in order to increase Westerners' knowledge of China, since translations of Chinese texts still form the basis of the West's understanding of China.

Literary works are considered an important enhancement of the teaching of Chinese language and culture to foreign learners. *Sanguo Yanyi* (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms* or *Three Kingdoms*^[1]) is the first of the "Four Great Chinese Classics" (cf. 2.1). The reasons for choosing *Sanguo Yanyi* and its translations as the current research topic will be further discussed in 2.5.11. In reference to the two complete English translations, a number of questions immediately arise, such as why the translators undertook such a project, what the translations look like, for whom the translations were made, which translation is more suitable for students of Chinese, what approaches the translators have used to achieve better effects and why a new translation was produced. These questions are central to this study, and will be addressed throughout the subsequent chapters.

1.2 Brief background information on the two translations and translators

This study focuses on two complete English translations of *Sanguo Yanyi*. These two translations are considered to be the most popular among Western readers (cf. France 2000: 232). The details of the two target texts

[1] These are the titles of the two complete English translations to be studied.

(hereafter TTs) are provided below, with brief background information on each publication and translator.

Translation 1: *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

Translated by C. H. Brewitt-Taylor

Reset and published by Tuttle Publishing in 2002

Pages: 1,360 (Volume 1: 690 and Volume 2: 670)

ISBN: 0-8048-3467-9

Brewitt-Taylor's translation was first published in two volumes in Shanghai in 1925. It was reprinted in the United States by the Charles E. Tuttle Company in Rutland, Vermont in 1959 and simultaneously published in Tokyo. This translation was the first full English translation of any of the major traditional Chinese novels. In this translation, the old Wade-Giles System^[1] was used to translate proper names. The translation, which focuses more on the story itself, supplies no notes on historical circumstances, but it was written in fluent and somewhat archaic English.

Charles Henry Brewitt-Taylor (1857—1938) was an Englishman. He came to China in his twenties and worked as an officer in the Imperial Chinese Maritime Customs in a number of Chinese cities. He spent most of his adult life in China. In addition to a successful career as a customs official, he also achieved distinction as a scholar of Chinese. He was the first person to translate a full Chinese novel (i.e. *Sanguo Yanyi*) into English and became one of the pioneers who introduced this genre to the English-speaking world. In 2009, a biography of Brewitt-Taylor by Isidore Cyril

[1] Wade-Giles is a Romanization system (phonetic notation and transcription) for the Chinese language, mainly for proper names and cultural items. Wade-Giles was developed from a system produced by Thomas Wade in the mid-nineteenth century, and became a set form with the publication of Herbert Giles's Chinese-English dictionary in 1892. Wade-Giles was the main system of transcription of Chinese language in the English-speaking world for most of the twentieth century. Wade-Giles was used in several standard reference books and in almost all books about China published before 1979, when the new Chinese Spelling System started to become accepted internationally.

Cannon was published in Hong Kong. This book, entitled *Public Success, Private Sorrow*, based on years of study and research, is “valuable reading for anyone studying the history of translation and the Western discovery of Chinese culture” (cf. Cannon 2009).^[1]

Translation 2: *Three Kingdoms* (Chinese-English Bilingual Version)
Translated by Moss Roberts
Foreign Language Press (P.R.C)
First Edition 2000
Pages: 3,115
ISBN: 7-119-02408-6

The translation by Roberts is the latest complete English translation. It uses the modern Pinyin name system.^[2] In addition to the text, the translator also provides eleven maps of important battles and numerous notes. Roberts also wrote a seventy-eight-page afterword, “About Three Kingdoms”, to discuss the backgrounds and possible themes of the novel.

Roberts was born in New York and is Professor of Chinese at New York University. He is a member of the Columbia University Oriental Thought and Research Institute, a director of the *Journal of Asian Scholars* and a member of the Oriental Research Society of America.

Due to the fact that the novel *Sanguo Yanyi* is lengthy—120 chapters divided into many separate stories—translators often choose only one or a

[1] Brief introduction found on the flap of the book cover of Cannon’s *Public Success, Private Sorrow*.

[2] “Pinyin” is short for “Hanyu Pinyin”. It was adopted by the People’s Republic of China in 1958 as a newly designed phonetic scheme to facilitate the promulgation of the standard Chinese language. The scheme is a Romanized system functioning to annotate standard Chinese pronunciation with Roman letters. The system was adopted in 1979 by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) as the standard Romanization for modern Chinese (ISO-7098: 1991). It has also been accepted by the government of Singapore, the Library of Congress, the American Library Association, and many other international institutions. For both Chinese natives and foreigners learning to speak Chinese and to enter Chinese language text into computers, Pinyin has become a useful tool.

few chapters to translate. According to Guo Yu (2008), “from the publication of P.P. Thomas’s translation of *The Death of the Celebrated Minister Tung-cho* in 1820 to the publication of Moss Roberts’s unabridged translation of *Three Kingdoms* in 1994, seventeen different English translations, abridged or complete, have come into being in the past 170 years.” Even the translators of the two complete versions started with abridged versions.

Numerous articles have been published in Chinese journals on Roberts’s translation of *Sanguo Yanyi*. These articles include reviews, comments on translation strategies and theoretical analyses, and a few relevant quotations and comments are mentioned here. Zhang Haoran (2001) is of the opinion that Roberts’s translation “has a good choice of words as it relies on the context; also its images and characters have been fully reproduced and the style remains close to the original”. Zhang Haoran and Zhang Xijiu (2002) conclude that the translating techniques Roberts employed include literal translation, liberal translation, contextual amplification and annotation. He Xianbin (2003) argues that Moss Roberts’s translation demonstrates that the polysystem theory cannot predict the strategies of an individual translator, and that English translations of Chinese works do not always have to be domesticated in order to gain acceptance among Western readers. Zhang Yu and Tian Cuiyun (2007) investigate the different approaches Roberts employed in trying to make his translation more fluent and natural.

A few papers that compare the two English translations also appeared in Chinese journals recently. Zhang Xiaohong (2007) introduces the idea of “translation purpose” from skopos theory and aims to demonstrate that the “purpose” affects the quality of the product by comparing the two English translations. Zhu Yuping (2008) compares the two English translations from a functionalist point of view. She finds that Brewitt-Taylor’s translation has made many more changes from the original text in order to make the stories more interesting to read, while Roberts’s translation

is very loyal to the original text. Chen Xiaoli and Zhang Zhiquan (2011) use skopos theory as a guide to compare the translations of the chapter titles in these two translations. Their analysis shows that Brewitt-Taylor's translation is more liberal, using such strategies as omission, rewriting and sense-for-sense translation. Roberts's translation, on the other hand, is more literal, adopting a word-for-word strategy. They conclude that the two different styles of the TTs are brought about by different translation skopoi and translation briefs. The relevant research in Chinese will be discussed further in the next section.

In reference to articles and papers published on the English translations of the ST in Chinese, it is significant to note that not a single academic paper discussing the translations has been published in English. One of the reasons for this might be that very few Western researchers have a sound enough knowledge of the Chinese language to be able to read and understand the ST sufficiently. Any attempt at commenting on the TT without referring to the ST itself is not convincing, at least academically. This research therefore aims to fill this gap since it discusses both TTs and compares them to the ST.

1.3 Overview of research conducted on the translations of *Sanguo Yanyi*

According to investigations carried out by the researcher, numerous articles and papers on the English translations of *Sanguo Yanyi* have been published in Chinese language journals over the past two decades. Luo (2009), for instance, collected nine papers on the topic in question and briefly comments on them. Most of these articles are only a few pages long and focus on one (small) aspect relating to the translation(s). More research has been done on Roberts's latest translation than on Brewitt-Taylor's. In