

Moss Roberts' Translation of *Three Kingdoms* and the Inscape of Ancient Chinese Military Culture

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Abstract

Three Kingdoms is one of the greatest literary works in China, and has a wide influence on Chinese society. It inherits the excellent ancient Chinese military culture, including the rich culture of the wars, military figures, military books, weaponry, and military system.

Military culture in ancient China is the intelligent fruit and a valuable heritage of Chinese people, reflecting their national integrity and character. However, the peculiarity of Chinese military culture always poses problems for translation, which hinders the way for it to be spread to the world. Moss Roberts has done a good job in translating this novel and made great efforts in reproducing the cultural information. This paper studies the translation problems caused by culture differences and translating techniques Moss Roberts has employed to convey source language culture, and to help the Western readers understand ancient Chinese society and people.

Key words: Moss Roberts; Military culture; Inscape

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INTRODUCTION

As a long historical novel of Chinese literature, the ideological and artistic value of the *Three Kingdoms* are not to be underestimated.

Three Kingdoms inherits the excellent ancient Chinese

military culture. It has not only a very high literary value, but also a high cultural value. Its content is profound, rich and complete, mainly in wars, military figures, military books, weaponry, and military systems. In the cultural background of globalization, the English version of *Three Kingdoms* has more important value and profound significance in spreading Chinese military culture to the world.

However, the peculiarity of Chinese military culture always poses problems for translation, which hinders the way for it to be spread to the world. Moss Roberts has done a good job in translating this novel and made great efforts in reproducing the cultural information.

Military culture in ancient China is an important part in Chinese traditional culture. It reflects the characteristics of Chinese culture and it becomes precious heritage of the Chinese nation. The elements of military culture mainly include: wars, military characters, military books and weapons.

1. WARS

Three Kingdoms is a model novel of ancient wars. It describes numerous wars. Particularly exciting is the description of pre-war preparations: how to determine the strategy and tactics of the opposing sides, how to formulate their plans, how to spy on the actual situation and how to use the enemies' weaknesses. These are all written very vividly.

The book describes more than 40 wars, showing scenes of thrilling war scenes, such as Guandu war, the Battle of Red Cliff, and the Battle of Yi Ling. Through Moss Roberts' translation we see how he helps in spreading ancient Chinese military culture.

Example 1: 袁绍移军逼近官渡下寨。审配曰：“今可拨兵十万守官渡，就曹操寨前筑起土山，令军人下视寨中放箭。操若弃此而去，悟得此隘口，许昌可破矣。”

Translation: Yuan Shao moved his camps closer to Guandu, Cao's strategic strongpoint. Shen Pei said, 'Have

a hundred thousand men raise mounds directly facing Cao's camp. Then our archers can control their position. If Cao retreats, we gain the key point of entry to the capital area, and the capital will fall."

In this sentence, "官渡" is where the battle took place. Moss Roberts adds an explanation "Cao's strategic strongpoint". "隘口" in ancient Chinese military culture refers to "mountain pass" which usually is narrow and critical. Moss Roberts translates it as "the key point of entry to the capital area", and it is easy for Western readers to understand.

Example 2: In Chapter 46 "Kongming Borrows Cao Cao's Arrows Through a Ruse", 孔明曰: "为将而不通天文, 不识地利, 不知奇门, 不晓阴阳, 不看阵图, 不明兵势, 是庸才也。"

Translation: "A military commander is a mediocrity," Kongming explained, "unless he is versed in the patterns of heavens, recognizes the advantages of the terrain, knows the interaction of prognostic signs, understands the changes in weather, examines the maps of deployment, and is clear about the balance of forces."

In Chinese traditional culture, "奇门" or "奇门遁甲" is based on The Book of Changes and the Eight Diagrams (eight combinations of three whole or broken lines formerly used in divination) and is the Prediction study at the highest level. Therefore, it has been called "Imperial Education", which means "the essential knowledge which must be learned by emperors and kings". Throughout the history, politicians, strategist and generals used it in decision making, and have had extraordinary achievements. In ancient time, "奇门遁甲" has been mainly used in military strategy and tactics. It is a word with comprehensive meaning, and thus a problem in translation. Moss Roberts is successful in solving the problem by translating it into "the interaction of prognostic signs". The word "interaction" properly express the complicated meaning.

Example 3: 每日退兵, 添灶而行。.....昔孙臆擒庞涓, 用添兵减灶之法而取胜.....。

Translation: With every new day of retreat, we will increase the number of cooking sites as we move on. ...Long ago Sun Bin captured Pang Juan by the ruse of decreasing the cooking sites as he increased his manpower.

"Increasing the number of cooking sites when retreating, and decreasing the cooking sites while increasing the manpower" indicates the ancient Chinese military tactics culture. Tactics have been playing a very important role in wars.

In the wars with Pang Juan, Sun Bin set a trap. He took the initiative to retreat, and decreased the cooking sites each day. Pang Juan was misguided in believing that a number of soldiers in the enemy troops escaped each day, and they had lost their will to fight. Then Pang Juan was self-conceited and underestimated the enemy troops.

Leading his large army, he chased after Sun Bin's troops and was taken in the trap. In great resentment, Pang Juan committed suicide after his army was defeated.

"Decreasing the cooking sites while increasing the manpower" was Sun Bin's magic weapon in wars. Zhuge Liang in the *Three Kingdoms* used the tactics of "increasing the number of cooking sites when retreating", which carried forward Chinese military strategy culture. By literal translation, Moss Roberts was very clear in expressing the meaning, and gave an honest-to-goodness account of Chinese military culture.

2. MILITARY CHARACTERS

Military characters, as a military elements, also belong to the military culture. In the *Three Kingdoms*, more than one thousand people were written. It successfully created a large number of figures including Cao Cao, Liu Bei, Sun Quan, Zhu Geliang, Zhou Yu, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun, etc. In dealing with the translation of the description of these people, Moss Roberts has been very careful in keeping the vividness and managed in conveying the the image of these characters to readers' minds.

Example 1: 那人不甚好读书; 性宽和, 寡言语, 喜怒不形于色; 素有大志, 专好结交天下豪杰; 生得身长七尺五寸, 两耳垂肩, 双手过膝, 目能自顾其耳, 面如冠玉, 唇若涂脂; 中山靖王刘胜之后, 汉景帝阁下玄孙: 姓刘, 名备, 字玄德。

Translation: This man, though no scholar, was gentle and generous by nature, taciturn and reserved. His one ambition was to cultivate the friendship of the boldest spirits of the empire. He stood seven and a half spans tall, with arms that reached below his knees. His ear lobes were elongated, his eyes widely set and able to see his own eras. His face was flawless as jade, and his lips like dabs of rouge. This man was a descendant of Liu Sheng, Prince Jing of Zhongshan, a great-great-grandson of the fourth Han emperor, Jing. His name was Liu Bei; his style, Xuande.

The translation of this sentence is a very good example of Moss Roberts' combination of domestication and foreignization.

"喜怒不形于色" is a description of someone who hides his emotion well. Due to the difference between Chinese and English, literal translation is not suitable here to describe a person's nature. Therefore, Moss Roberts has translated it to "generous by nature". This adaptation helps to make the language more fluent and logical.

"两耳垂肩, 双手过膝, 目能自顾其耳" are Chinese culture-specific description. In China, there has been a saying which goes "the one who has big ears is blessed". That's why Liu Bei is described as a person with big ears. The description is somewhat exaggerating. Moss Roberts keeps the foreignness in his translation. Although the readers will feel somewhat strange, they will be clear that

Liu Bei is one of the heroes in the novel, and should be different from ordinary people.

Example 2: 许攸笑道: “世人皆言孟德奸雄, 今果然也。” 曹亦大笑曰: “岂不闻兵不厌诈!”

Translation: Xu You smiled again, saying, “the world calls you ‘villain.’ I see how true it is.” Cao was smiling too. “As you should know,” he said, “there’s no end of tricks in warfare.”

Faced with Xu You’s judgment, Cao Cao admitted readily, because he knew well the importance of strategy in wars. This conversation gave indication of an open heart of Cao Cao.

In the *Three Kingdoms*, Cao Cao was a complex character. He was a great talent with great will-power, but at the same time he was selfish and cruel. In China, Cao Cao has been commonly accepted by most people as a cruel villain. However, Moss Roberts was faithful to the original, and well reproduced the images of various characters and the author’s real intention. His translation indicated that Cao Cao was a villain, but at the same time, he did not cover at all the merit of Cao Cao, which is faithful to the original meaning.

3. MILITARY BOOKS

Chinese ancient military books appeared in the early times and were in great number. *Sun Zi’s Art of War* has been universally accepted as one of the earliest military books. From the strategic point it discusses the major issues in the military field, and puts forward a series of military rules. *Thirty-Six Stratagems* is based on military thinking and lessons learned from the struggle of wars.

As we all know, *Three Kingdoms* is inseparable from the *Art of War* and *Thirty-Six Stratagems*. *Three Kingdoms* mainly describes the wars, and many of the campaigns are based on the *Art of War*, *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, and other military books. In the English version of *Three Kingdoms*, Moss Roberts has managed in using literal translation to keep the foreignness and using simple words to keep the language fluent and transparent. It is said that It is easier to understand Sun Zi’s principles through the “Three Kingdoms”.

Example 1: “你好大胆! 黄盖用苦肉计, 阚泽下诈降书, 你又来献连环计: 只恐烧不尽绝! 你们把出这等毒手来, 只好瞒曹操, 也须瞒我不得!”

Translation: ‘You audacity is remarkable! Huang Gai works the ‘battered-body scheme,’ Kan Ze delivers the letters announcing Huang Gai’s sham defection, and now you submit the plan for linking the boats—your only concern being that the flames might not consume everything! Such insidious mischief may be enough to take in Cao Cao, but it won’t work on me.’

“苦肉计” refers to the trick of securing the enemy’s faith by intentionally injuring oneself. The earliest record of this stratagem is in *The States Wu and Yue in the Spring*

and *Autumn Period* (770-476 B.C.), It is also the thirty-fourth stratagem in *Sun Zi’s Art of War*.

“连环计” also comes from the military book *Sun Zi’s Art of War*, and it is the thirty-fifth stratagem among the thirty-six stratagems. Moss Roberts translate as ‘battered-body scheme’ and ‘the plan for linking the boats’. By using simple words in translation, he managed to help the western readers to have some idea of these stratagems.

Example 2: 玄德回: “将在外, 君命有所不受。”

Translation: “You know the custom,” Xuande answered, “A general in the field may refuse his lord’s command.”

“将在外, 君命有所不受” comes from the military book *Sun Zi’s Art of War*. This is a description of the privilege enjoyed by the generals in the field. In ancient China, there was a tradition that the generals in the field had the privilege to take the opportunities for combat without waiting for the emperors’ decision. However, English readers are not familiar with this Chinese tradition, so it may be difficult for them to understand. In his translation, Moss Roberts adds “You know the custom”, which helps the English readers to get rid of the cultural obstacles, and understand the ancient Chinese tradition.

4. THE MILITARY WEAPON

Weapons and equipment are products of human society. It developed along with the development of the social productive forces and the demand from wars. In *Three Kingdoms*, weapons are numerous and complicated. Due to the great differences in Chinese and Western weapons, detailed translation and explanation will be strenuous, and there is also a danger of causing the translation clumsy.

Example 1: 两阵对圆, 只见吕布顶束发金冠, 披百花战袍, 摆唐猊铠甲, 系狮蛮宝带, 纵马挺戟, 随丁建阳出到阵前。

Translation: The two armies faced off. There for all to see was Lü Bu, his topknot bound in a golden crown, wearing a millefleurs battle robe, girded with armor and a belt bearing a motif of lions and reptiles. Giving his horse free rein, his halberd poised, Lü Bu followed Ding Yuan to the front of the lines.

The words “唐猊铠甲” and “纵马挺戟” are used to describe armor and weapons. Moss Roberts translated them almost literally. By using simple words and almost no explanation, Moss Roberts is successful in conveying the meaning.

Example 2: 玄德謝別二客, 便命良匠打造雙股劍。雲長造青龍偃月刀, 又名“冷豔鋸”, 重八十二斤。張飛造丈八點鋼矛。

Translation: After bidding the traders a grateful farewell, Xuande had the finest smith forge for him a pair of matching double-edged swords; for Lord Guan a Green Dragon Crescent-moon blade, also known as Frozen

Glory, weighing eighty-two jin, and for Zhang Fei, an eighteen-span spear of tempered steel.

“青龍偃月刀” and “丈八點鋼矛” are both military weapons. “青龍偃月刀” is a long-handle blade, the shape of which is like a crescent moon. The translation of it is “Green Dragon Crescent-moon blade”. “丈八點鋼矛” or “丈八蛇矛” is a steel spear which is eighteen span long. The translation is “eighteen-span spear of tempered steel”.

Moss Roberts' literal translations clearly describe the weapons and keep the characteristics of the weapons, and effectively keep the Chinese culture.

Moss Roberts' English translation of *Three Kingdoms* focuses on the source language culture, and tries to keep the original cultural images. His translation has proved that the coexistence of domestication and foreignization

will help to get rid off cultural barriers in translation

Great differences in culture hinder effective communications between people, so translation plays a decisive role in globalization. In the process of translating the literary books, cultural translations become the focus. Historical context, cultural background, translation purposes, translation strategies and other factors should be taken into consideration.

REFERENCE

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