

# Creative Treason of Moss Roberts' Allusion Translation in *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel*

LIU Si-yi

College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University, Chengdu, China

*San Guo Yan Yi* is one of the Four Great Classical Novels of ancient China. A large number of Chinese allusions have been cited in this book, containing rich cultural connotations and national characteristics. Under the guidance of creative treason, this paper analyzes the translator's conscious and unconscious creative treason in the translation process by comparing the original allusion with the translated text and further explores the reasons of creative treason. The study has found that through creative treason in allusion translations, Moss Roberts conveyed the deeper meanings of the allusions, connecting the context closely and ensuring the readers' understanding of the whole text; but he also failed to reveal the form or the historical and cultural connotation of some allusions in the original text.

*Keywords:* *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel*, Moss Roberts, Allusion, Creative Treason

## Introduction

Since the promotion of the "Going Out" strategy of the Chinese culture, Chinese culture with a long history has received much attention. Particularly, a major current focus is *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel*, a complete English version of *San Guo Yan Yi* translated by Moss Roberts. As Guo Yu and Luo Xuanmin (2015) stated, it excels for its scholastic characteristics and has been warmly accepted by the scholarly readership. Many studies on it agree that this English version is the most authoritative and excellent. According to *Dictionary of San Guo Yan Yi* by Shen Bojun and Tan Liangxiao in 2007, there are 86 allusions quoted in *San Guo Yan Yi* (Mao edition). However, with rich cultural connotation and national characteristics, allusions cannot be accepted by the target readers easily. Therefore, Moss Roberts has conducted creative treason in his allusion translation.

## Creative Treason

The concept of creative treason has been first promoted by French sociologist Robert Escarpit, who argued that translation is always a sort of creative treason. In China, Professor Xie Tianzhen has further introduced and developed this concept, dividing the translator's creative treason into two categories, conscious creative treason and unconscious creative treason.

Xie Tianzhen (1999) pointed out that the conscious creative treason in literary translations deserves careful analysis because it reflects the translator's efforts to faithfully reproduce the spirit of the original work in the

process of translation. Through conscious creative treason, the translator is able to produce the same or similar artistic effect in the target text as in the original, thus creating the same or similar associations as the reader of the original work do. On the other hand, unconscious creative treason is inevitable in the process of translation and dissemination of literary works. Xie Tianzhen (1999) also pointed out that for comparative literature, unconscious creative treason has certain research value, because it reflects the translator's misunderstanding and misinterpretation of other cultures, which is the blocking point of cultural or literary exchange; it also reflects the collision, distortion and deformation between different cultures.

## Case Study: Creative Treason in Translation of *San Guo Yan Yi*

### Conscious Creative Treason

Conscious creative treason means that the translator with his own translation principles and goals usually exert his creativity consciously in translation practices.

#### Rephrasing

As Xie Tianzhen (1999) said, when a literary work produced in one language environment is "transplanted" to another language environment, in order to produce the same artistic effect as the original work, the translator must find proper linguistic means in the target language environment that can mobilize and stimulate the same or similar associations. It means that when literal translation does not work, the translator has to make necessary "rephrasing" to convey the deeper meaning of the source text clearly.

Example 1 南柯一梦 (第23回 第127页)

Source Text: 霎时觉来, 乃南柯一梦, 口中犹骂“操贼”不止。

Target Text: Cao crumpled in the wake of the blow, as Cheng repeated the words "traitor, traitor," until he had awoken from the empty dream. (Chapter 23, p. 310)

“南柯一梦” is an idiom allusion, used as a metaphor for the impermanence of gain and loss or to simply describe a dream. In the book, General Dong Cheng was discussing with Wang Zihui and others to assassinate Cao Cao, but did not find the proper opportunity to do so. He thought about it day and night so that he dreamed that he successfully attacked Cao Cao with Wang Zihui, but found that it was just a dream after waking up in excitement.

Moss Roberts adopted the translation strategy of domestication, translating this allusion as “the empty dream”, which expressed the deeper meaning contained in this allusion. With domestication, as Xie Tianzhen (1999) pointed out, the target readers can understand the context fluently and clearly. However, with this translation method, the translator lost the historical meaning and cultural characteristics contained in the Chinese allusion.

Example 2 高祖还沛 (第79回 第421页)

Source Text: 乡中父老, 扬尘遮道, 奉觞进酒, 效汉高祖还沛之事。

Target Text: The village elders swarmed out to greet their naïve son, bearing flagons of wine as gifts as their forefathers had once done on the Supreme Ancestor's triumphant return. (Chapter 79, p. 989)

The historical allusion tells the story that after establishing the Han Dynasty and becoming the emperor, the Supreme Ancestor Liu Bang, returned to his hometown in Pei County, drinking and singing with his fellow villagers for more than ten days. It is a metaphor for returning to one's hometown after his or her success. In *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel*, when Cao Pi, the king of Wei, came back home, people in his hometown came to the road and offered wine to welcome him, imitating what the villagers did when Liu Bang returned to his hometown.

The literal translation of this allusion should be "the Supreme Ancestor Liu Bang returned to his hometown Pei County". Pei County, as a place name in ancient China, is unfamiliar to foreign readers. Furthermore, the readers also do not know that Pei County was the hometown of the Supreme Ancestor, so they cannot understand its special meaning as the Chinese readers do. Moss Roberts, by combining his knowledge of Chinese history and understanding of the context, replaced the Chinese word "还沛" with "triumphant return", directly pointing out the deep meaning of this allusion. Besides, through the analogy with the allusion, the readers are able to better understand the glory situation of Cao Pi in this book.

### Amplification

Amplification means that necessary words or sentences are added by the translator based on the source text. With the compensatory processing like adding information (official position, status, etc.), completing the content or adding notes at the end of the text, the translation is consistent with the target language in terms of grammar and linguistic form. Besides, its associative meaning and cultural background are consistent with the source text, which can realize the equivalence between the ST and TT in content, form and style.

Example 3 秦晋之好 (第16回 第87页)

Source Text: 主公仰慕将军, 欲求令爱为儿媳, 永结秦晋之好。

Target Text: My master, long your admirer, seeks your treasured daughter's hand in behalf of his son in order to bind the two houses in marriage as the states of Qin and Jin did in ancient times. (Chapter 16, p. 216)

The ruling families of the Spring and Autumn states of Qin and Jin regularly intermarried; hence marital alliance came to be called Qin-Jin relations. Mao (introductory note): "In the Spring and Autumn period marriages were habitually entered into by rivals. When Zhen Ying was in Jin, Qin attacked. When Mu Yi was in Qin, Jin severed relations with Qin. Marriage was even less likely to bring harmony to Lü Bu's dealings, for how could the man who had disavowed his fathers have a son-in-law? How could Yuan Shu, who had disavowed his own brother [Shao], have a relationship with a stranger?"

This allusion denotes the intermarriage between the rulers of Qin and Jin for generations in the Spring and Autumn Period. Later it is used to describe the connections through marriage. In this book, the fight between Yuan Shu and Liu Bei was deadlocked. In order to win Lü Bu's help, Yuan Shu sent his subordinate Han Yin to persuade Lü Bu to marry his daughter to Yuan Shu's son. Han Yin quoted this allusion in their conversation and eventually got Lü Bu's consent. This allusion not only expressed the blessing and praise of the marriage, but also implied their intention of military alliance behind it.

Professor Xie Tianzhen (1999) noted that the ability of language to bring readers rich associations is closely related to its historical and cultural accumulation, as well as the life experience of the language users in

that language environment. This allusion is closely related to the Chinese history and culture which are not known by the target readers. Therefore, Moss Roberts not only added information in the text, but also attached notes to introduce its historical background and the deeper meanings. In this way, the translator enables the target readers not only to understand the intent of using this allusion in the text, but also to gain a deeper understanding of its historical background, which is a positive manifestation of creative treason.

Example 4 盗跖、下惠之事（第89回 第473页）

Source Text: 方信盗跖、下惠之事，今亦有之。

Target Text: After this I can believe the ancient legend by which the robber Zhi and the worthy Liu Xiahui were brothers; I have seen it myself today! (Chapter 89, p. 1117)

The two men mentioned in this allusion, Zhi and Liu Xiahui, were brothers with very different characters in the Spring and Autumn Period. Zhi was a robber who led thousands of bandits, while Liu Xiahui was a virtuous minister of the state of Lu, regarded as a saint by people. In *San Guo Yan Yi*, Zhuge Liang's army was poisoned by Meng Huo. Zhuge went to the mountain to seek the help of a hermit, who turned out to be Meng Huo's elder brother, Meng Jie. One of the two brothers did not submit to the imperial court, while the other one helped others with good intentions, which reminded Zhuge Liang of the similar historical story of robber Zhi and Liu Xiahui.

The translation of this allusion has reflected what Professor Xie Tianzhen (1999) called "a subjective effort of the translator to approach and reproduce the source text with his own artistic creativity", which is a manifestation of the creativity. "The story of Zhi and Liu Xiahui" in the source text was expanded as "the ancient legend by which the robber Zhi and the worthy Liu Xiahui were brothers", which not only pointed out that they were brothers, but also illustrated their opposite social identities. This translation helped the readers to understand the historical background and meaning of the allusion completely, and connected the allusion to the situation of the two brothers Meng Huo and Meng Jie, making the context more closely linked and easy to read.

### Adjustment

Adjustment is applied to make the target language more natural and fluent by adjusting the word order, structure, etc. However, as Professor Xie Tianzhen (1999) pointed out, one problem caused by domestication is that the culture of the target language could merge the culture of the original. In the allusion translation in this book, the translator adopted the method of adjustment in order to ensure the simplicity and fluency of the language, but some allusions were merged into a whole sentence, thus making the target readers unaware of these special phrases containing Chinese historical and cultural characteristics.

Example 5 齐桓公欲见东郭野人（第38回 第201页）

Source Text: 昔齐桓公欲见东郭野人，五反而方得一面。

Target Text: Long ago Prince Huan of the state of Qi tried five times before he succeeded in seeing the recluse of Dongguo, Guan Zhong. (Chapter 38, p. 479)

This allusion refers to that when Prince Huan of the state of Qi in the Spring and Autumn Period went to meet a courtier, he was refused three times a day. His attendant persuaded him to give up, but he did not listen.

Finally he met the courtier on the fifth time. This allusion reflects the wise and persistent move of the prince to select the talented and the capable. In *San Guo Yan Yi*, Liu Bei had visited Zhuge Liang twice but failed to meet him. Guan Yu thought that Liu Bei should not continue to visit Zhuge Liang. Liu Bei therefore cited this allusion as an analogy, expressing his appreciate and desire for wise talents.

In the translation text, Moss Roberts adjusted the grammar sequence of this sentence, putting the two short Chinese sentences into one long English sentence to make the translated language more fluent and natural. Although the translator translated the complete meaning of the allusion and helped the readers understand its deeper meaning, the adjustment of the sequence had destroyed the phrase structure to a certain extent. The allusion lost its formal characteristics and the foreign readers can not clearly recognize it as a Chinese allusion with certain historical and cultural significance.

Example 6 垓下一战（第43回 第229页）

Source Text: 昔高皇数败于项羽，而垓下一战成功，此非韩信之良谋乎？

Target Text: The founder of the Han, Gao Zu, was defeated over and over by Xiang Yu, but the final victory at Gaixia was the result of Han Xin's good counsel, was it not? (Chapter 43, p. 542)

This allusion refers to a decisive battle between the Han and Chu armies at Gaixia, symbolizing the starting point of the prosperity and strength of the Han Dynasty after Han's repeated failure. In the book, Zhuge Liang came to visit Sun Quan and had a debate with his man Zhang Zhao. When Zhang Zhao questioned Liu Bei's defeat, Zhuge Liang replied by quoting this historical allusion to prove that victory and defeat were commonplace in the military. His reply was well-reasoned so that Zhang Zhao could not refute it.

Moss Roberts adjusted the structure of the allusion in his translation as "the final victory at Gaixia", which not only made the context closer, but also allowed the readers to clearly understand the outcome of this historical event. However, as Professor Xie Tianzhen (1999) said, there is a problem that the culture of the target language could merge the culture of the original in the adaptation of the strategy of domestication. In the translation of this allusion, the translator lost the formal characteristics of the Chinese allusion, making it no longer retaining the heterogeneity of Chinese allusion.

### Transliteration

Transliteration can preserve the exoticism of the original text and avoid the loss of meaning caused by improper literal translation or liberal translation.

Example 7 鸿门会（第21回 第114页）

Source Text: 此非鸿门会，安用项庄、项伯乎？

Target Text: "Not another Hongmen, I hope," Cao said, smiling. "We hardly need a repeat of that performance."<sup>10</sup> (Chapter 21, p. 278)

"Hongmen" alludes to a situation of murderous intrigue. Shortly before conquering the empire, Liu Bang attended his rival Xiang Yu's banquet at Hongmen. Yu's adviser tried to have a sword dancer assassinate Bang, but a second performer checked his every move. Finally one of Bang's commanders, Fan Kuai, burst in, fully

armed, and put an end to the sword dancing performance, thus saving the future first emperor of the Han (See Ssu-ma Ch'ien, 1961, pp. 52-54).

Historically, the “Hongmen” refers to a banquet attended by Xiang Yu and Liu Bang during the battles. Later, people often use “鸿门会” as a metaphor for a situation full of intrigue and ill intentions. In this book, Cao Cao invited Liu Bei for a drink, wanting to test whether Liu Bei would become his rival to seize power. Guan Yu and Zhang Fei came in a hurry, trying to protect Liu Bei on the pretext of dancing. This situation was very similar to the historical banquet at Hongmen. Therefore, by saying that this was “not another Hongmen”, Cao Cao explained that he had no intention to kill Liu Bei, dispelling their doubts easily.

As this allusion was cited in the dialogue of the characters, lengthy explanation was inconsistent with Cao Cao's personalities and the contemporary setting. Furthermore, before the publication of *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel*, the allusion “Hongmen” had already been introduced in detail by some other scholars like Burton Watson. Therefore, Moss Roberts adopted transliteration, preserving the heterogeneity of this allusion. Besides, a detailed commentary was added at the end of the text to introduce the historical story, so that the readers can easily understand the deeper intension of citing this allusion and gain knowledge of this famous historical event. This process reflected the creative work of the translator in the translation process.

### Omission

Xie Tianzhen (1999) mentioned that there also exists conscious missing translation, which can be seen as abridged translation.

Example 8 豫让“众人国士”之论（第25回 第134页）

Source Text: 岂不闻豫让“众人国士”之论乎？

Target Text: Have you forgotten Yurang's saying? (Chapter 25, p. 325)

“If the king treats me commonly, my service will be common; if he treats me worthily, my service will be worthy.”  
Bi Yurang served Zhi Bo, a leader of the kingdom of Jin at the end of the Spring and Autumn period. (See Chapter 29, n. 5)

During the Spring and Autumn Period, Zhao Xiangzi killed Yu Rang's master Zhi Bo, and Yurang was so determined to avenge Zhi Bo that he stabbed Zhao Xiangzi several times. Zhao Xiangzi asked him why he did not take revenge for his another two masters but only for Zhi Bo, and Yurang gave this famous saying, meaning that Zhi Bo had treated him well, so he wanted to return the favor. In the book, Cao Cao attacked Xuzhou, making Liu Bei and Zhang Fei separated from Guan Yu. Admired Guan Yu's loyalty and skill, Cao sent Zhang Liao to convince Guan Yu to defect. Guan Yu had made three conditions, but Cao Cao refused the last one. Therefore, Zhang Liao said: “Have you forgotten Yurang's saying”, reminding Cao Cao that historically, Zhi Bo was rewarded by Yurang for his generous treatment. If Cao Cao wanted Guan Yu to join him willingly, he should treat him with generosity and consideration.

In the translation, Moss Roberts omitted the specific content about “众人国士” in Yurang's discourse, but added a note at the end of the text, which was a conscious missing translation. Xie Tianzhen (1999) mentioned that there are various reasons for the conscious missing translation, such as: to conform to the habits and customs of the receiving country, to cater to the interests of the target readers, to promote dissemination, or to take into

account moral or political factors, etc. In this allusion translation, Moss Roberts made the conscious missing translation to conform to the linguistic and cultural habits of the target language, and also to help the readers read.

This allusion is derived from Chinese history, condensed into eight Chinese characters through years of transmission. It is not a complete statement of the specific content of Yurang's discourse, but is represented by two key words “众人” and “国士”. For the readers of the source language who are familiar with Chinese history, they can quickly realize the complete content after reading the key words; however, for the target readers who do not know the origin, the literal translation of the two key words does not help. If the translator expanded it into a complete sentence in the text, the translation would be lengthy, which does not match the personal character and the current situation in the text. Therefore, the translator consciously omitted the two key words, only retaining “Yurang's saying”, and then added the complete content of this saying at the end of the text through the note. The translation not only ensured the conciseness and fluency of the target language, but also allowed the readers to read and understand the meaning of the allusion in depth.

### Unconscious Creative Treason

Although Moss Roberts is an excellent sinologist, he is also a native English speaker who does not have a thorough understanding of the Chinese culture. Therefore, it is inevitable that he made unconscious creative treason in the allusion translation in *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel*. Unconscious creative treason reflects the translator's misunderstanding and misinterpretation of other cultures, which is the blocking point of cultural or literary exchange; it also reflects the collision, distortion and deformation between different cultures (Xie, 1999, p. 151).

#### Mistranslation

Example 9 臧仓毁孟子（第23回 第126页）

Source Text: 吾乃天下名士，用为鼓吏，是犹阳货轻仲尼、臧仓毁孟子耳！

Target Text: To make a renowned scholar like me serve as drum master is a poor imitation of the tricks of such villains of old as Yang Huo who slighted Confucius, or Zang Cang who tried to ruin Mencius. (Chapter 23, p. 306)

This allusion tells a story that during the Warring States period, Duke Ping of Lu wanted to meet with Mencius, but his favorite courtier Zang Cang slandered Mencius in front of him and thus prevented him from meeting with Mencius. This allusion is cited as the slander of a talented man. In the book, Mi Heng was appointed as a drummer by Cao Cao, and felt that this was a waste of his talent. Therefore, he angrily rebuked Cao Cao at a banquet, citing this allusion to express his anger and resentment for not being employed as a wise man.

However, it is worth noting that Moss Roberts unconsciously mistranslated this allusion by translating “毁” as “ruin”. According to the original meaning of the allusion, “毁” means denigration or slander in the context. But the translator directly translated it as “ruin” based on its commonly-used contemporary meaning in Chinese, which may cause the target readers' misunderstanding to the allusion. Xie Tianzhen (1999) noted that one reason for the unconscious mistranslation is that the translator lacks sufficient understanding of the linguistic connotation or cultural background of the original text. Obviously, this mistranslation is caused by the translator's lack of clear distinction between the ancient and contemporary meanings of the Chinese word “毁”.

Example 10 逆取顺守（第60回 第320页）

Source Text: 且‘兼弱攻昧’、‘逆取顺守’，汤、武之道也。

Target Text: You know, ‘to incorporate the feeble and attack the incompetent,’ to ‘take power untowardly but hold it virtuously,’ was the way of the great conquerors, kings Tang and Wu. (Chapter 60, p. 757)

This allusion refers that according to the feudal concept of orthodoxy, “逆取” denotes the fact that Tang and Wu betrayed their king to seize the power by force; and “顺守” means to govern the country by following common rules. In the book, Liu Bei discussed with Pang Tong to attack the state of Western Shu, but hesitated to do so for worrying about losing his trust of the people. Pang Tong cited this allusion to advise Liu Bei that this was the way to pacify the world.

When dealing with this allusion translation, Moss Roberts translated the Chinese characters “逆” and “顺” into the adverbs “untowardly” and “virtuously”. According to *Oxford Dictionary*, “untoward” means unexpected, unusual or not wanted. We can see that “untowardly” obviously differs from the original meaning of “逆” in the allusion, which refers to betray the sovereign by force. Moss Roberts simply understood “逆” as “unexpected”, but in fact it also has the meaning of “betray” according to *Xinhua Dictionary*, which is the nearest meaning of this allusion. This mistranslation was also caused because of the translator’s lack of understanding of one Chinese character’s multiple meanings.

### Omission

Example 11 强弩之末，势不能穿鲁缟（第43回 第232页）

Source Text: 曹操之众，远来疲惫，近追豫州，轻骑一日夜行三百里，此所谓‘强弩之末，势不能穿鲁缟’者也。

Target Text: Cao Cao’s host is exhausted, having come so far. In their recent pursuit of Lord Liu, their light cavalry was covering three hundred *li* a day - clearly a case of ‘a spent arrow unable to pierce fine silk.’ (Chapter 43, p. 549)

This allusion means that even a sharp arrow shot from a strong bow cannot penetrate thin silk as its power is exhausted. In the book, Zhuge Liang compares Cao Cao’s army to “a spent arrow” to illustrate that although Cao’s army was strong, they could no longer fight against enemy because they marched too far.

In the translation, Moss Roberts omitted the meaning of “strong bow” and only retains the phrase “a spent arrow”, which did not show the meaning of the powerful bow with long range, nor did it contrast with the powerlessness of the arrow at the end of the range. Therefore, part of the allusion’s deeper meaning is missing. However, in general, this omission does not affect the reader’s understanding of the allusion’s whole meaning.

### Conclusion

To conclude, one of the most significant findings to emerge from the study is that creative treason in Moss Roberts’ allusion translation in *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel* is a universal phenomenon. On the one hand, the allusions in *San Guo Yan Yi* contain the contents of Chinese history and culture, which are not completely acceptable to the target readers. In order to better connect with the context and ensure the readers’ understanding, Moss Roberts made conscious creative treason. He exerted his creativity and adopted different translation techniques, trying to reproduce the original information and the culture of the source language. On the other hand, due to the objective linguistic and cultural differences which lead to the translator’s insufficient understanding of some Chinese characters or cultures, there exists unconscious creative treason such as mistranslations and



missing translations. Overall, with his solid bilingual skills and extensive knowledge of sinology, Moss Roberts has successfully preserved and conveyed the connotations and backgrounds of most allusions despite of the linguistic and cultural barriers between English and Chinese.

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