A Study on the Acceptance of the English Translation of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* by Overseas Readers Based on Python Data Analysis Technology

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Paperless reading has become a prevalent trend among global readers, leading to the accumulation of vast amounts of reading data on numerous book websites. This offers new perspectives for studying translated works. This paper utilizes Python-based data processing technology to collect and analyze reader reviews of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* on Amazon and Goodreads, presenting trends in review volume, word cloud maps, and readers' emotional attitudes in a quantitative manner. The findings indicate that overseas readers generally exhibit a positive emotional tendency towards *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and recognize its cultural value. However, negative opinions do exist, focusing on aspects of the book's quality, such as printing quality and proofreading. These results provide valuable insights for the foreign translation of canonical texts.

Keywords: Romance of the Three Kingdoms, readers' comment, emotional analysis

Introduction to the English Translation of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

Romance of the Three Kingdoms is one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature and is considered a shining jewel in the history of Chinese literature. Since December 1820, when P. P. Thoms (1791-1855) published his abridged translation "The Death of the Celebrated Minister Tung-cho" (1820) from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in the 60th issue of Volume 10 of the first edition of *The Asiatic Journal*, the novel has been translated and read widely. The history of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* going abroad began. Over the course of the next 200 years, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was translated into multiple editions by both Chinese and foreigners from various fields. However, the translation of this classic work is a challenging task due to its semi-literary style, which includes numerous valuable Chinese historical materials, a multitude of names and places, and a plethora of Chinese nouns, in addition to various complex poems and diplomatic and military descriptions. Translating the entirety of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is a demanding and time-consuming undertaking that requires a high level of bilingualism and translation expertise. Currently, the complete translation is available for purchase in four major editions online.

1. The first full translation of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, completed by Charles Henry Brewitt-Taylor, is hereafter referred to as Charles edition.

2. This edition *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel* is the result of an in-depth collaboration between New York University Professor Moss Roberts and the Chinese literary community, hereafter referred to as Roberts edition.

3. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a collaboration between Penguin in the UK and the renowned sinologist Martin Palmer, is hereafter referred to as Palmer edition.

4. Professor Yu Sumei of East China Normal University translated, along with the American editor Ronald C. Iverson, who was then the mayor of Chicago, a corrected version based on Charles edition, hereafter referred to as the Yu edition.

This paper utilizes a Python tool to gather readers' evaluations of the four aforementioned translations from two platforms and employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses to visualize the collected big data as the research object. The aim of this study is to analyze readers' specific acceptance, identify the strengths and weaknesses of the four translations, and determine which parts of the translations are most appealing to English readers.

Data Processing

Data Collection

When using Python to crawl data from two platforms, the initial step is to specify the data target. The reader ratings on both platforms consist of two main components, namely star ratings and reviews provided by readers. In regards to the four translated editions, the Charles edition and Roberts edition were translated earlier, and currently there are seven editions available for sale from various publishers (see Table 1). For the purpose of this study, the editions have been classified based on the publisher information listed under the product details on the Amazon website, as follows.

Table 1

Star Ratings of Different Versions by Different Translators

Editions (by translator)	Editions (by publisher)	Release date	Star rating
Charles edition	Tuttle Publishing; New edition	April 15, 2002	4.3
	Digireads.com	July 3, 2021	4.6
Roberts edition	University of California Press; First edition, Part One/Two	February 1, 2004	4.5
	University of California Press; Abridged edition	September 30, 1999	4.5
	Foreign Languages Press; Slp edition	January 1, 2008	4.5
	Foreign Language Press; 1st edition	January 7, 2011	4.5
Palmer edition	Penguin Classics; Illustrated edition	September 11, 2018	4.6
Yu edition	Tuttle Publishing; 1st edition	May 20, 2014	4.7

Amazon's star ratings use an intelligent algorithm that takes into account whether readers purchased and whether reviews accompany the ratings, so the data feedback is more comprehensive and provides feedback on readers' overall impressions of the translation.

Compared to Amazon, Goodreads has a much different mechanism for categorizing reader reviews. In Goodreads, reader reviews of multiple translations are consolidated under the *Three Kingdoms* category on the site's page. The website filter is set to display only the English text, with a total of 358 reader reviews.

After specifying the target of data crawling, data were obtained by crawling the reviews on Amazon using a Python-based web scraping tool on March 20, 2023. A total of 892 reviews were obtained, including 534 from Amazon and 358 from Goodreads.

Data Processing Methods

To begin, the author preprocessed the data by removing non-English comments, non-text comments, and any content unrelated to the translations, among other things. Out of the original 892 comments, 165 were removed, leaving 727 comments for analysis. The author utilized Python language processing tools to normalize the data through noise reduction techniques, such as removing special characters, converting cases, expanding abbreviations, and eliminating stop words. Subsequently, the readers' comments were sorted by word frequency, and word cloud maps were created to display the content of readers' comments for each version. Finally, sentiment analysis was conducted to examine the readers' experiences of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

Quantitative Review Analysis

Volume of Reader Comments

The trend of reader comments across the platform is depicted in Figure 1, which illustrates a generally upward trend. From 2000 to 2006, the number of reader reviews was relatively low, as Chinese culture had yet to gain international exposure. The second stage began with the 2008 Olympic Games, during which the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and other traditional Chinese culture books gained popularity among foreign readers, though the fervor subsided somewhat after the games. From 2011 onward, there was a renewed growth in the number of reader comments, with a peak in 2014. In the years that followed, the number of comments remained consistently high, with some slight fluctuations, and reached a small peak in 2021 (see Figure 1).
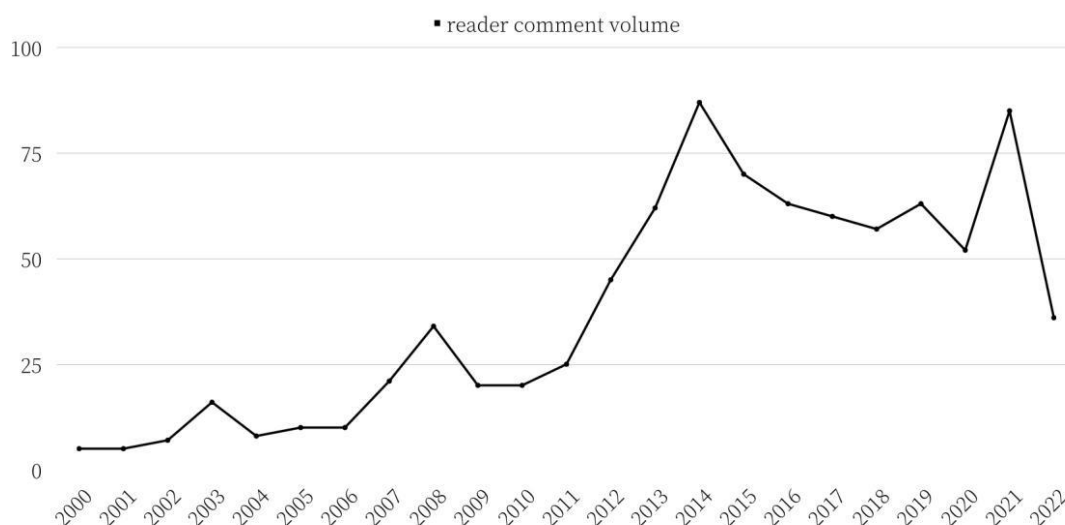

Figure 1. Reader comment volume from 2000 to 2022.

Word Frequency Statistics Word Cloud Map

The authors sorted the reader review text by word frequency, with higher frequency words occupying a central position and appearing in a larger font size. This visually highlights the themes of the review text, allowing researchers to quickly identify the focus of different readers. Based on the word cloud map generated from the

word frequency of the reader review text, it is apparent that most readers are interested in the story, kingdoms, characters, Chinese culture, and history of "Three Kingdoms". Many readers also mentioned the complex character relationships, particularly with regards to major characters such as Cao Cao, Liu Bei, and Zhuge Liang. The abundance of names in the text poses a significant reading challenge for many foreign readers. Furthermore, translation issues were a common theme among readers. The word cloud map also indicates that Moss Roberts' translation is widely recognized for its academic authority, with high word frequency for translation, edition, and volume (see Figure 2). Some readers even use it as a benchmark for comparing other translations, while authors of other versions are mentioned relatively infrequently.

Figure 2. Word cloud map.

Qualitative Review Analysis

To conduct a thorough investigation of readers' reading experiences and understand their emotional tendencies and underlying reasons, the author conducted sentiment analysis on the text and carefully examined the comments following the analysis in this chapter. The author will elaborate on the specific information in the following aspects:

Sentiment Analysis of Reader Reviews

Sentiment analysis is a process of using natural language processing, machine learning, and computational linguistics techniques to automatically identify and extract subjective information from text data. The main objective of sentiment analysis is to determine the attitude, opinion, and emotional tone of a piece of text, whether it is positive, negative, or neutral. It can be used for a variety of applications, such as brand monitoring, customer feedback analysis, social media monitoring, and market research. Sentiment analysis can be performed on various types of text data, such as social media posts, product reviews, news articles, and customer feedback surveys.

In the field of sentiment analysis, two main approaches are commonly used: sentiment dictionary-based approaches and machine learning algorithms approaches. In this study, the author employed a machine learning-based algorithmic model developed by the divominor team, which is particularly suitable for analyzing the sentiment of online comments and reviews. The results of sentiment analysis on all 727 reviews are presented in

Figure 3, which reveals that 78.68% of the reviews are positive (572 reviews), 13.34% are negative (97 reviews), and 7.98% are neutral (58 reviews) (see Figure 3). Overall, readers' experiences of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* are largely positive, with negative comments mainly focusing on the difficulty of reading and the quality of translation, rather than the story itself.
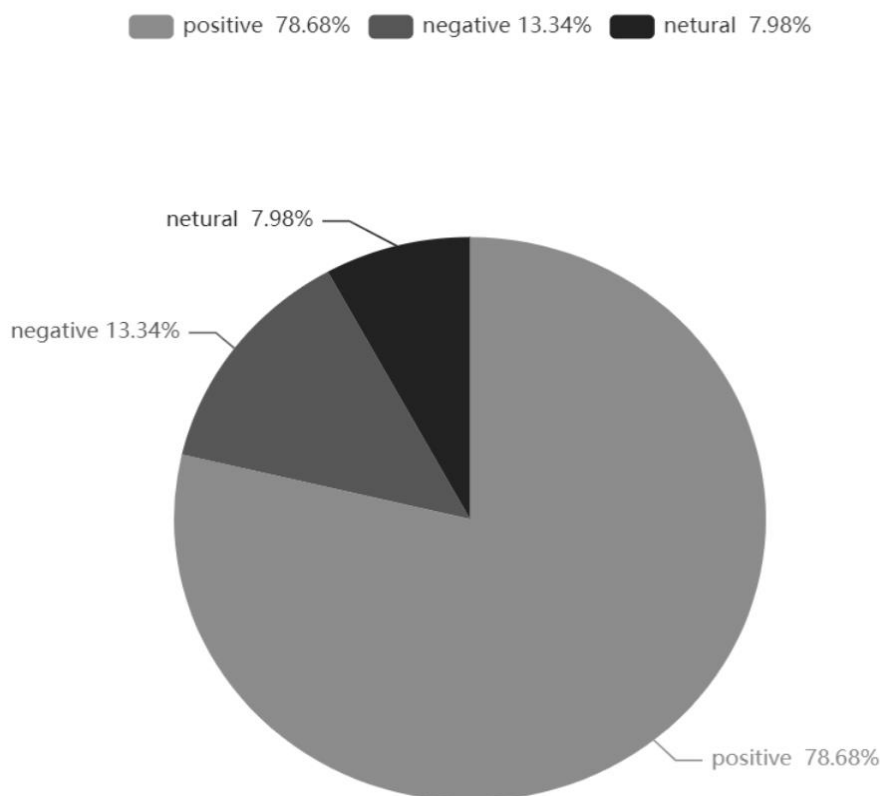
positive 78.68%   negative 13.34%   netural 7.98%

netural 7.98%

negative 13.34%

positive 78.68%

Figure 3. Sentiment analysis.

Comments Related to the Content of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

Romance of the Three Kingdoms is a Chinese cultural treasure. The main story is based on the authentic history of the Three Kingdoms, with many reasonable fictional details, a rich storyline, intertwined feuds, military generals crossing the sands, and civil officials fighting with tongues, and these merits have widely received positive feedback from readers.

First of all, the various topics in the novel, including history, war, and scheming, appealed to relevant readers. "The military tactics and the swift movements of the battalions/division were so smooth. As a military enthusiast, I felt obliged to read this book, but after reading it, I knew this was a book to read over and over and over again" (James 007 "P.", Amazon reader, 2001). "The story has so many subplots and biplots and time—over 100 years and at least as many people to start" (Taro, Goodreads reader, 2019).

In addition, readers also mentioned that *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* provides a deeper understanding of China: "Though the book is mainly about military-political events in early China, it greatly revealed many aspects of human nature and the culture of China and human nature even today" (Chris J, Amazon reader, 2021). "An exelent source if you are looking to find out more about the culture, society, morals and history of China

(the last one is greatly helped by the essays in the afterword)" (Olga, Goodreads reader, 2017). As a traditional Chinese cultural symbol, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* embodies certain values and beliefs that resonate with readers.

There were also negative comments about the content of the work, with many readers finding the large number of characters making it very difficult to read: "I thought Yue Jin and Yu Jin (two of Cao Cao's generals) were the same person for 75% of the book" (Veronian, Goodreads reader, 2019). "I quite like books that are long even if they are very dry, like economics books. But this one was a bit too not good to read. It reads like a very simple story but too many characters are thrown at you for no more than a line or two and you end up lost trying to unnecessarily remember them all" (Tim, Amazon reader, 2012). In different cultural fields, readers have different aesthetic preferences and different criteria for judging the content of a text, and translations of traditional texts need to take into account the various strata of readers in another cultural fields when translating. "Any translation strategies and methods adopted for present needs should not be absolutized or modeled as the only correct approach. It is important to acknowledge that whatever is translated or how it is translated reflects a historical choice" (Liu, 2015, p. 6).

Translation-Related Comments

In this study, four translations of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* have received mixed reviews from readers. While the Roberts edition was praised for its academic authority, some readers found it too focused on historical details. "Not was I was hoping for. So many names after name. Like a chronology and not like a great flowing story" (Yoda Jazz, Amazon reader, 2013). In addition, Yu edition has been recognized by many readers:

> The translation adopts a dynamic translation strategy and targets a contemporary popular audience, which is fundamentally different from the Roberts edition, which is aimed at university classroom teaching as well as academic research, and also differs from the Charles edition published nearly a century ago. (Fan & Zhao, 2022, pp. 53-59)

"I've read other translations of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and love the characters and story. This translation is vibrant and lively, and my favorite by a country mile" (W. Bevins, Amazon reader, 2020). It can be observed that translations that prioritize the acceptance of contemporary overseas readers have a greater influence on their perceptions.

In the process of reader acceptance, many readers are easily confused by the rich Chinese cultural load of words in the novel, such as the names of many official positions in the three kingdoms, due to their different cultural backgrounds. "It might be a classic, but for readers used to modern writing, it's really quite difficult to follow a plethora of characters with names so similar it takes ages to realise who's who" (Squirrel, Amazon reader, 2013).

In the process of translation, the content conveyed by the text itself is ultimately limited. Thus, to "tell a good Chinese story and spread a good Chinese voice", it is important to take the dissemination of the literary values and the main spirit of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* as a crucial translation purpose. This means that the translation should not only ensure faithfulness to the original in terms of content, but should also provide appropriate explanations and descriptions of the text through subtexts and translation notes, in order to facilitate readers' in-depth understanding of the original (Xu, 2017, p. 43). A well-written introduction and annotation can enable readers to better understand the background, cultural and historical aspects of the original text.

Evaluation of the Overall Quality of the Translation

According to the reviews, in terms of the overall quality of the translation, readers focused on these aspects, starting with the spelling issue that was mentioned in many negative and neutral reviews.

"Biggest disappointment, actually, is that this version of the book is littered with typos. Nothing that detracts too much, but frequent enough that it looks like Penguin skipped a proofreading stage" (Marcus, Amazon reader, 2019). This kind of comments suggests that the quality of proofreading and editing of books cannot be ignored, including spelling, punctuation, word choice, and grammar, and that good proofreading and editing can improve the reader's reading experience and comprehension. This is what is lacking in many canonical English translation projects nowadays. In addition, aspects such as the typography, printing quality, and binding of books are also important. Good typography should conform to the reader's reading habits and make the reader feel comfortable.

Conclusions

"In communication, there is an invisible power that permeates, and language contains a compulsion that we cannot perceive" (Liu, 2008, p. 30). In today's international cultural field, it is common for western media to smear China using various tactics, and Chinese traditional culture is a powerful tool to break through overseas cultural hegemony. *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, one of China's Four Great Classics, contains a wealth of traditional cultural treasures. Based on the above research, it appears that the acceptance of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is very high on the two mainstream websites. Although readers express dissatisfaction with the translation style, book quality, and other factors, they generally resonate with the epic plot and agree with the many Chinese values conveyed in the book.

The final product of every translation project serves as a channel for readers to understand China. "Discourse is always filled with the content and meaning of ideology or life" (Bakhtin, 2009, p. 408). This holds particularly true for famous works like *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. In selecting translations, readers, determining the time period in which readers' needs are met, and the characteristics of the text generated during translation, sufficient effort must be put in. We should also pay attention to the construction of relevant information channels. Chinese literary translations disseminated overseas should not be mere isolated texts. Through the operation of relevant websites and forums, we can provide readers with more convenient channels to understand China and contemporary China. This kind of approach can also improve the reception effect of Chinese culture worldwide.

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