

# A study on the English translation of Chinese Medical Idioms in two English versions of *The Three Kingdoms*

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**Abstract:** The article compares and analyzes some representative translations of Chinese medical idioms in the two translations of *The Three Kingdoms* by Moss Roberts and Sumei Yu, finding that Roberts' version to a certain extent, to rewrite the original idioms in medicine, dissimilation degree is higher, but not good for spreading the original meaning of Chinese medical idioms. Yu Sumei, as a Chinese, whose version of medical idioms is closer to the original meaning of the express in Chinese medicine. So, from the perspective of spreading Chinese medicine culture, Yu's version is more outstanding.

**Key words:** *The Three Kingdoms*; Medical idioms; English translation studies

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## I. Introduction

As the first historical romance novel in the history of Chinese literature, *The Three Kingdoms* plays a significant role in spreading Chinese culture. Among them, traditional Chinese medicine culture, as an important part of Chinese culture, has also been fully reflected, and medical idioms are one of the important means to reflect traditional Chinese medicine culture in the novel. Based on some representative translations of medical idioms in the two versions of *The Three Kingdoms* by Moss Roberts and Sumei Yu, this paper compares and analyzes the translations of medical idioms in traditional Chinese medicine by two translators with different native language backgrounds, to supply reference for the external dissemination of traditional Chinese medicine culture.

## II. Roberts' version and Yu's version and their identities as translators

Moss Roberts (1937-), a professor of East Asian languages at New York University and a renowned Sinologist and translator, his English translation of *The Three Kingdoms*, published in 1992, is widely regarded as the best English version of *The Three Kingdoms*. It is a treasure in the western study of *The Three Kingdoms* and supplies a reliable basis for the western sinology study of Chinese classical novels.

Sumei Yu (1940-), a professor, Department of English Language and Literature, East China Normal University, Her English translation of *The Three Kingdoms* was published in 2014, and an English-Chinese counterpart was published in 2017. Professor Yu, as the first Chinese to translate the whole book of *The Three Kingdoms*, left a valuable legacy in the history of English version of *The Three Kingdoms* and supplied an important channel for the world to understand Chinese traditional culture.

## III. Comparison of Chinese medical idiom translation in two versions

**(1) Poker face:** Its primary meaning is that happiness and anger are not shown on the face, which is used to describe people who are good at hiding their emotions. Traditional Chinese medicine believes that happiness and anger are not shaped in color belongs to the forced suppression of emotional exposure, which is not conducive to the normal vent of emotions, and it will lead to emotions into the body, damaging organs and leading to sickness. In the first chapter of *The Three Kingdoms*, the author uses it to describe Liu Bei in detail:

This man, though no scholar, was gentle and generous by nature, taciturn and reserved. (Roberts' version)

This man was not very studious, but he was generous and kind. Being a man of few words, he controlled his feelings well, always maintaining a calm exterior. (Yu's version)

The Roberts' version translates this idiom as "reserved", meaning conservative and traditional. It is concise and easy for non-native Chinese readers to understand, but it does not accurately express the original meaning, which may lead some readers to misunderstand Liu Bei as a traditional and conservative person. From the perspective of traditional Chinese medicine, "reserved" cannot show Liu Bei's ability to suppress and control inner emotional changes and bring out the crucial point. Yu's version is "controlled his feelings well, always maintaining a calm exterior." This idiom not only accurately expresses the original meaning of the idiom, but also embodies the characters' deep and calculating work.

**(2) Brace one's heart:** Its primary meaning is to keep one's spirits up. From the point of view of traditional Chinese medicine, if the elderly can keep his chin up in daily life, it can play a good fitness role. In the Fifth chapter, the author uses it to describe Zhang Fei's mental states vividly:

Zhang Fei's fighting spirit flashed at this welcome chance. The two crossed and tangled more than fifty times. (Roberts' version)

They were equally matched, and neither could gain any advantage over the other after an exchange of about three score of bouts. (Yu's version)

Roberts' version adopts the literal translation method, translating "vigorous spirit" into "Fighting spirit flashed", which can accurately show the scene when Zhang Fei was burning up his will to fight the enemy bravely. Compared with Roberts' version, Yu's adopts free translation, simply using "equally matched" to describe the fierce fighting scenes, which is not so vivid.

**(3) Sigh and groan:** It primarily mean that sighing incessantly with sadness, boredom, pain, etc.

Traditional Chinese medicine believes that moderate moaning and sighing can improve psychological tension to a certain extent, effectively reduce chest distress and pain, and is beneficial to physical and mental health. In the twenty-third chapter, the author uses the express to show Dong Cheng's feeling:

He stayed with his patient day and night, noting his mournful sighs but refraining from expressing his concern. (Roberts' version)

Living in his place and seeing him at all times, he soon found that some secret grief was sorely troubling him. However, he dared not ask question. (Yu's version)

The Roberts' version uses "Mournful sighs" to express Dong Cheng often laments because he is depressed, which is in line with the plot and reflects dong's feeling of depression. The Yu's version uses "secret grief" to express his grief, which can also well highlight Dong Cheng's appearance of becoming sick with grief. In general, the two translators' translations here can vividly depict Dong Cheng's depressive image at this time, and each has its own strengths.

**(4) Perturbed in mind:** Perturbed in mind describes a lack of concentration or clarity of mind. According to Traditional Chinese medicine, the mind concealing the god refers to the mind commanding and dominating activities such as spirit, consciousness, thinking and emotion. If the mental function of the heart master is abnormal, there will be insomnia, dreams, delirium, and other reactions, serious may endanger life. In the eighth chapter, the author uses "perturbed in mind" to describe Dong Cheng:

I was unwell and not at all myself. I said the wrong thing and did your injury. Do not hold it against me. (Roberts' version)

I was irritable and confused yesterday owing to my illness. I know I wronged you. Don't take it to heart," he said. (Yu's version)

In the original work, here is a "trance" to describe the scene in which Dong Zhuo indulges in women and has no intention of political affairs, but claims to be upset by illness and no intention to scold Lv Bu. The Roberts' version uses "not at all myself" to show that Dong Zhuo's words do not agree with his own. It can better reflect the situation that Dong Zhuo hurt Lu Bu unintentionally when he was in a trance, focusing on how Dong Zhuo made excuses for himself. In Yu's version, "Irritable and confused" was used to describe Dong Zhuo's claim that he was "angry" and "confused", which led to scold Lv Bu. In fact, "Irritable" suggested that Lu Bu was "jealous" and "irritable", which foiled the conflict between Dong and Lu. Therefore, relatively speaking, Yu's version here is closer to the plot development of the original.

**(5) Tears flow and snivel and lie awake all night:** "Tears flow" is usually used to describe extreme grief. From the Chinese medical point of view, "tears flow" is a symptom of a cold. "Lie awake all night" means that one cannot fall asleep and has to think about a lot of things. From the point of view of traditional Chinese medicine, "lie awake all night" is the symptom of insomnia, which is a common physical and mental disease. The two expresses both appears in the twentieth chapter:

Dong Cheng read the edict through his tears. He could not sleep that night and in the morning returned to the library to reread the document. (Roberts' version)

So ran the decree and Dong Cheng read it with streaming eyes. There was no sleep for him that night. (Yu's version)

In the original work, "tears flow" is used to describe Dong Cheng's heart-broken appearance at that time, and "lie awake all night" is used to describe Dong Cheng's mood that night. Although the Roberts' version uses "tears" to express snot and tears crisscross, it is not as powerful as the "Streaming eyes" in Yu's version in terms of expressiveness. In the performance of "lay not sleep soundly", the two versions are comparable.

**(6) Look pale:** "Look pale" describes that your face loses its color, and the color is like earth when you are at the height of your fright. Traditional Chinese medicine believes that disease can be inferred from the color of the face, which is the complexion in traditional Chinese medicine inspection, so the earthy color of the face is also one of the manifestations of disease. In the twenty-third chapter, the author uses "look pale" to describe Liu Zhang's state:

Liu Zhang turned the color of ash and fell over. (Roberts' version)

His words came as a severe shock, and Liu Zhang, turning ashen with anguish, collapsed. (Yu's version)

Both versions use the word "ash" to describe Liu Zhang's face as pale as death due to excessive panic. From this point of view, no matter the two translators' understanding of the plot is relatively consistent, and ash's description is also vivid.

**(7) Vigorous:** "Vigorous", from the *Analects of Confucius Ji*, means young people are full of energy. In Traditional Chinese medicine, both blood and pneuma are the basic substances that constitute and maintain the vital activities of the human body. In the twenty-first chapter, the author uses "vigorous" to show the look of power of Sun Ce:

"There is Sun Ce," Xuande suggested. "The leader of the southland is in his prime." (Roberts' version)

Sun Ce is young and valiant, a leader in the east, is he a hero? (Yu's version)

In the original text, Sun Ce was described as "vigorous" in his prime to set off the momentum of the overlord as a dominant party. Perhaps because Moss Roberts did not know enough about the word itself, he directly omitted the translation of the word in his translation, which weakened the meaning of the plot here to some extent. Yu Sumei, as a native Chinese translator, uses the words young and Valiant to fully show Sun Ce's youthful and fearless character. Yu's translation here is more brilliant.

**(8) Cut to the bone:** The original meaning of the expression is that the pain is so strong that one feels like his bones are being sawed off, which describes extreme pain or hatred. Traditional Chinese medicine thinks essence can nourish pith, pith can nourish bone, and essence blood can grow mutually, essence gives birth to pith, and pith can also change blood. Therefore, the pain into the bone marrow may be the performance of renal sperm loss, bone marrow loss. In the twenty-third chapter, the author uses it to describe the scene that Cao Cao often suffered from head wind, which was painful to the bone marrow:

He suffers from chronic headaches, with pain that pierces his marrow. (Roberts' version)

Because he often has severe headaches. When this happens, he sends for me. (Yu's version)

Cao Cao suffered from a headache for a long time. Every time he had a headache, he wanted to die. Roberts' version was rendered literal, using pain that pierces his marrow to make the word stand out in the marrow, a little stiff but still able to show the original meaning. Yu's version only expresses that Cao Cao suffers from headache, but the description of the pain degree is directly omitted, which is still lacking in plot laying.

**(9) Getting stout again -- a sigh of regret about one's idleness:** It primarily means that the flesh on his thighs had regrown because of one's long absence from riding. But in the original text, it is used to describe one live a comfortable life for a long time without doing anything and lose ambition. In Traditional Chinese medicine, one will become lazy and out of fighting spirit due to lack of exercise. In the thirty-fourth chapter, this expression is used to describe how Liu Bei is regret and sad for his idleness and unambitiousness.

Doing so, he noticed the extra weight around his middle. (Roberts' version)

Making an excuse, he rose and went to the toilet, where he noticed that he was getting heavy and stiff from lack of exercise and he, too, shed tears. (Yu's version)

In the original text, for his idleness and lack of exercise, Liu Bei didn't ride a horse for a long time, so he put on his idleness. Both versions use literal translation, but Yu's version also cleverly uses "stiff" to describe Liu's current state of mind when describing her weight gain. In addition, for the sake of readers' further understanding, Yu's translation explains that Liu Bei's "signing and living again" was for his idleness. This treatment can make readers, especially non-Chinese native speakers, have a more correct grasp of the plot of this part of the story.

**(10) Distraction:** The original meaning of the mood is irritable, confused thoughts. From the perspective of traditional Chinese medicine, distraction is a kind of mental illness, which is caused by insufficient yin essence and strong liver fire. In the thirty-first chapter, the author uses distraction to describe Yuan Shao's mental state in the face of sudden enemy forces.

Yuan Shao arrived in Jizhou too agitated to administer his province. (Roberts' version)

When Yuan Shao came home, he was troubled in mind and could not attend to the business of administration. (Yu's version)

The original text here uses "distraction" to describe Yuan Shao after the defeat as depressed, upset and disengaged from political affairs. Agitation is agitated, with the word 'agitation' being used in the Roberts' version. Yu's version uses "troubled in mind". Both translations are straightforward and close to the original meaning.

**(11) Acclimatization:** Acclimatization means not being able to adapt to the climatic conditions or eating habits of a place. Traditional Chinese medicine points out that acclimatization is also a disease, the key to overcome lies in regulating the spleen and stomach. In the thirty-third chapter, GuoJia feels sick when he is forced to move to Liao Dong.

Unfortunately, the adviser, unused to the punishing climate of the north, was lying ill in a wagon. (Roberts' version)

The advisor had by then fallen victim to the effects of the climate and lay in his cart, very ill. (Yu's version)

Acclimatization is caused by maladaptation to the dominant flora in the environment. Chronic coughing, vomiting, abdominal pain and diarrhea can occur if you change your location and become vulnerable to bacteria in your new

environment. For non-native Speakers of Chinese to understand the plot, it needs to explain in detail the reasons for Guo's disobedience. Yu's version emphasizes the weather but does not mention the geographical change. Roberts' version details the weather and regional variations, and in that sense the translation here is clearer.

**(12) Feel uneasy even when eating and sleeping:** It means one can't eat and sleep, because he is worried or upset. Traditional Chinese medicine holds that negative emotion is bad for one's health, and when we worry about something or someone, spleen function will be affected, and the spleen food digestion, absorption and transport, is responsible for the human body blood metaplasia, once the spleen function is impaired, Qi and blood will be insufficient, so the body will be affected, organ such as heart problems, is easy to appear the symptom of heart palpitations, hot. In the forty-third chapter, Sun Quan is in this state.

Sun Quan retired; his mind deeply divided. He was unable to eat or sleep. (Roberts' version)

Sun Quan went to his private chamber, greatly troubled in mind. He could neither eat nor sleep, for he was again wavering between fight and submission. (Yu's version)

The original text here uses "feel uneasy even when eating and sleeping" to describe Sun Quan's worried state of mind currently. Roberts' version and Yu's version both translate it into "unable to eat or sleep". Although the meaning is relatively straightforward, it fits the plot description of the original text.

**(13) Emaciation with sallow complexion:** It means yellow face and thin body. Describe a person who is malnourished or ill. Traditional Chinese medicine thinks that the person's complexion is yellow for many reasons, such as nervous, depressed, annoyed, etcetera, have no good rest etc. can lead yellow face. In the fifth-second chapter, Liu Qi is addicted to alcohol and sex, so his complexion is thin, and he struggles to catch his breath.

Disease has penetrated his vitals. His face looks feeble and wasted. His breathing is troubled, and he spits blood. The man cannot live beyond six months. (Roberts' version)

Well, I see Liu Qi has indulged too freely in wine and women. He looks miserably emaciated and he even gasps for breath. He is such a wreck beyond cure that I will not give half a year's life. (Yu's version)

The original article here uses "Emaciation with sallow complexion" to describe Liu Qi's appearance of being extremely weak and terminally ill due to excessive indulging in wine and women. Roberts' version uses "feeble and wasted" to describe Liu Qi's feeble state, while Yu's version uses the word "emaciated" to describe them extremely weak. In terms of the expressive force of face yellow and thin, Roberts' version is more correct, but if the description of the plot before and after the intoxication and the illness, the overall effect of Yu's version is more tension and intensity.

**(14) Be in a trance:** It means delirious or uneasy. According to Traditional Chinese medicine, the condition of trance may be caused by lack of blood, overwork or long-term anxiety and pressure. It can be improved with rest and improving mood and sleep. In the sixty-second chapter, Yang Song is in a trance.

Zhang Su became suspicious at his brother's aimless. (Roberts' version)

However, His brother noticed that he was absent-minded, which he could not explain. (Yu's version)

The original text uses "in a trance" here, mainly to describe Zhang Song in the conversation, absent-minded, distracted, in order to show Zhang Song's inner state of extreme contradiction. Aimless, though used in the Roberts' version, has the same purpose, it is seldom lacking in intensity. Comparatively, the "absent-minded" used in Yu's version is more consistent with the description of the original plot.

**(15) Sick with sorrow and anger:** It means to be sick with sorrow and anger, describes extreme grief and indignation. According to Traditional Chinese medicine, people have seven emotions, namely joy, anger, worry, thought, sadness, fear and shock, which are the reaction of people's spiritual consciousness to external things. Disease caused by the seven emotions known as depression, and anxiety into disease, is one of them. In the sixty-sixth chapter, Xun You is sick with sorrow and anger, and dead with regret and sad last.

When Xun You heard this, he was so exasperated that he fell ill and died some ten years later. (Roberts' version)

When Xun You heard of this he was grieved and fell ill. About ten years later he died, at the age of fifty-eight. (Yu's version)

Sorrow and anger into disease appeared in the original text here, used to describe Xun You grief and anger intertwined with the mood. The Roberts' version uses "exasperated", emphasizing anger, and the Yu version uses "grieved", emphasizing sorrow, neither adequately captures the aching feeling of the two emotions interwoven together.

**(16) Cleanse one's heart and limit one's desires:** It means keeping your mind quiet and clean and having fewer desires. Traditional Chinese medicine believes that people's desires are endless. If there are too many selfish thoughts and unreasonable thoughts, when you get what you want, you will have sorrow and sadness. If you think too much about it, you will become sick. Therefore, people should keep the mood of magnanimous, heart attune, so that the work can be conducted, the cause can be successful; The mood is happy and smooth, the seven emotions cannot be disturbed, the viscera function can coordinate healthy, life can be lively, enduring. The expression appears in the one hundred and fourth chapters.

I humbly beg that Your Majesty keep an honest mind and limit your desires, disciplining yourself and caring

tenderly for the people. (Roberts' version)

I wish that Your Majesty will always purify your heart and limit your desire; Practice self-control and love your people. (Yu's version)

In the original text, it is used to be clearing the mind of distractions, keeping the mind quiet, or keeping the mind pure and having fewer desires. The difference between the two versions lies in the understanding and expression of "pure heart". Roberts' version uses "honest mind", which is relatively straightforward translation. Although it is easy to understand, it is not deep enough. The "purify your heart" used in Yu's version is more Taoist and more consistent with the original meaning.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This paper makes comparisons and analysis of the translation of some representative Chinese medicine idioms in Roberts' and Yu's versions of *The Three Kingdoms*. It is found that because of the native language background and the understanding of traditional Chinese culture, Moss Roberts mostly adopted the methods of rewriting and literal translation when dealing with these Chinese medicine idioms. To some extent, this makes the translation more in line with the reading and understanding habits of non-native Chinese readers and makes the full text easier to understand. Sumei Yu, as a Chinese, can understand and interpret these idioms from the perspective of Traditional Chinese culture, to make the translation more tension in plot laying and characterization of characters, and enable non-native Chinese readers to appreciate the elegant style of the original work more deeply.

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