Quite Possibly The Greatest Book I've Read

This 14th-century novel portrays a fateful moment at the end of the Han dynasty (206 BC - AD 220) when the future of the Chinese empire lay in the balance. Fearing attacks by three rebellious states, the emperor sent out an urgent appeal for support.

My Personal Review:
Romance of the Three Kingdoms is possibly the most famous and important novel in classic Chinese literature. Not only is it the earliest of the Four Great Books (as evidenced by its more archaic language), but it created a complete cultural phenomenon whose impact is still fresh today - - just ask all the young people today who, without having read a word of the book, still know the characters from the strategy and fighting video games released by the company Koei. And how many literary works can claim to have had a direct impact on history as this book, which was used as a strategy text by the great Manchurian leader Nurhachi and his son Hongtaiji?

I'd read the original archaic text when I was about eight years old, so obviously my views will be heavily slanted by my familiarity with this text. On approaching this translation, what I find is a well done, respectful and informative translation that doesn't quite nail the tone of the original text, but will be a good read for modern readers who don't read Chinese.

And to be honest, Chinese is extremely hard to translate into English. Just the fact that subjects, articles and pronouns are often omitted from a sentence is enough to cause nightmares for a Chinese-English translator. And even by Chinese standards, The Three Kingdoms is a work whose linguistic economy is staggering. In one page, this book can convey the
deaths of half a dozen characters, three to four battles, multiple schemes, and include four or five tribute poems, to boot. Such is the style of this work, and it could not have been easy for translator Moss Roberts to adapt this style into English. And he has done the job remarkably, for though I dont think he was able to convey the flavour and rhythm of the original language (the question is, also, whether that would have been possible), his translation makes a good read, and strives to be faithful to the original text, down to the chapter divisions and the inclusion of the tribute poems which frequent the book. This was an essential piece in the style of the book and I was joyed to see the device retained.

There are instances scattered throughout where I felt the tone of the language may have been misinterpreted, or diluted by the language barrier. Obviously, Im not a Chinese professor (as Prof. Roberts is), but as a native speaker, I felt his translations sometimes didnt quite hit the mark. For example, in the original text, one poem on the character Cao Cao distinctly used a word which meant deception or guile, but Prof. Roberts adapted it to craft, which dilutes the disapproving tone of the original. When Yuan Shao refused aid to Liu Bei on account of his sons illness, his advice to the messenger was if he is in trouble, he may seek refuge with me, which suggests patronage, not find refuge north of the river, which suggests a tactical manoeuvre related to geography. These are but two examples and you can certainly argue that the meaning of the original text is up for grabs, but as a Chinese native speaker and reader, one who has grown up with this text and re-read the book hundreds of times, I still find the translation a little off. There is also no attempt at creating period flavour in the language -- the translation is modern, not aiming to add archaic English flavour to try to reflect the age of the original Chinese text. This may be a good point, however, since the use of archaic English added to the language barrier might have resulted in a book thats very difficult to read. I think Prof. Roberts sacrificed flavour for clarity, a fair tradeoff to the benefit of the translation.

Again, the question is whether an English translation (or any other translation) could ever be accurate in this way to the original. Personally, I do think many of the discrepancies in meaning could have been avoided, or ameliorated. However, as aforementioned, for a reader who has never read the original, this issue wont affect his/her enjoyment of the text. Just the fact that there is a translation of this extremely important work of Chinese literature is a cause for celebration, and for those people new to this realm, this set of books is a great discovery.

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