

Variation and Reconstruction of Zhuge Liang's Images in *Three Kingdoms* Translated by Moss Roberts

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As a classic novel, *San Guo Yan Yi* raises a crucial cross-cultural communication question: how can Western readers accurately and objectively understand Zhuge Liang's image in its overseas translation? Influenced by cultural context disparities and the intervention of the translator's subjectivity, Moss Roberts has boldly transformed and reshaped Zhuge Liang's traditionally-perceived image. In *Three Kingdoms*, from the image of an omnipotent wise man, a benevolent person, and a loyal and unwavering sage, Moss Roberts constructs images of Zhuge Liang who, while possessing genuine talent and knowledge, is also narrow-minded, jealous of the able and virtuous, and has a tinge of hypocrisy, thus creating a strong tragic implication. Through comparisons, this study aims to provide a new dimension for Zhuge Liang's image, offering references for the study of cross-cultural translation of Chinese classical literature, deepening the understanding of how cultural identities are negotiated in translation.

Keywords: *Three Kingdoms*, Moss Roberts, Zhuge Liang, variation, reconstruction

Introduction

So far, there have been three full English translations of *San Guo Yan Yi*, by C.H. Brewitt-Taylor, Moss Roberts, and Chinese scholar Sumei Yu. In the early 20th century, Brewitt-Taylor released the first full translation. Influenced by Victorian culture, his translation featured archaic language, using the iambic meter for poems and old English words like “ye” and “anon”. This helped British readers understand the *Three Kingdoms* and enhanced the work's literary charm, though later its style became less accessible. In the 1990s, Moss Roberts published *Three Kingdoms*. His translation adopted modern English, preserved the original's simplicity, and explained cultural elements through notes, winning popularity overseas and attracting extensive academic attention. In May 2014, Sumei Yu's translation marked the first English version by a Chinese translator. While opinions vary, it brought fresh perspectives, enlivening the novel's dissemination in the English-speaking world. Each translation, with unique features, has played an irreplaceable role in introducing this Chinese classic to the global stage. Among them, *Three Kingdoms* translated by Moss Roberts has attracted much attention and has been the focus of research by many scholars at home and abroad.

In *San Guo Yan Yi*, Luo Guanzhong crafted an iconic portrayal of Zhuge Liang as a paragon of loyalty, wisdom, and integrity, presenting readers with an almost idealized version of the historical figure. Drawing on

Greek tragedy while emphasizing Chinese interpretive frameworks, Constantine Tung posited that the core tragedy of the narrative stemmed from heroes' "defiance of cosmic foreordination" (Tung, 2007, p. 3). Anne E. McLaren later noted that Tung attributed the story's tragic weight to Zhuge Liang's character. Consequently, translators' handling of such themes profoundly shapes English readers' comprehension of traditional Chinese values.

Current research on Moss Roberts' translation of *Three Kingdoms* has yielded significant insights, primarily focusing on his translation strategies, treatment of culture-laden terms, representation of specialized cultural domains (e.g., official titles), and characterizations of figures like Diao Chan, Liu Bei, and Cao Cao. However, existing studies rarely explore the transformation and reinterpretation of Zhuge Liang—the narrative's linchpin—in the translation process, nor do they offer in-depth analyses of how classic literary characters are reconstructed across cultures. This study thus aims to examine the dynamic shifts in Zhuge Liang's portrayal by comparing Roberts' translation with the original text, thereby illuminating the mechanisms underlying character reconstruction in cross-cultural communication.

Moss Roberts' Interpretation of Zhuge Liang

Moss Roberts mentioned in the afterword that *Three Kingdoms* was "seven parts fact and three parts fiction" (Roberts, 1991, p. 1461). When compared to Western literary works, *Three Kingdoms* shares similarities with parts of the *Iliad*, certain historical plays by Shakespeare (such as the Henry VI trilogy), and works like Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* or certain novels by Sir Walter Scott. However, as a historical account, *Three Kingdoms* includes a substantial amount of non-literary material sourced from various historical references (Roberts, 1991, p. 1461).

Moreover, Moss Roberts especially emphasized the importance of Zhuge Liang in *Three Kingdoms* in the afterword. And Zhuge Liang's image is bound to be influenced by literary factors and undergo changes. In *Three Kingdoms*, from the image of an omnipotent wise man, a benevolent person, and a loyal and unwavering sage, Moss Roberts constructs images of Zhuge Liang who, while possessing genuine talent and knowledge, is also narrow-minded, jealous of the able and virtuous, and has a tinge of hypocrisy, thus creating a strong tragic implication.

Variation and Reconstruction of Zhuge Liang's Images in *Three Kingdoms*

Drawing from Moss Roberts' influential translation of *Three Kingdoms*, this analysis explores the shifts in Zhuge Liang's character portrayal regarding wisdom, morality, and loyalty.

Change of the Image of Wisdom

In Moss Roberts' translation of *Three Kingdoms*, the variations in Zhuge Liang's image as a wise man can be observed from the following translation cases:

Example (1)

ST: 鲁肃入见周瑜，备说孔明取箭之事。瑜大惊，慨然叹曰：“孔明神机妙算，吾不如也！” (Luo, 1979, p. 391)

TT: Meanwhile, Lu Su explained in detail to Zhou Yu how Kongming had acquired them. Zhou Yu was astounded. Then, with a long sigh of mingled admiration and despair, he said,

“Kongming’s godlike machinations and magical powers of reckoning are utterly beyond me!”² (Roberts, 1991, p. 557)

Moss Roberts added note 2: In *Sanguozhi pinghua* (PH) (p. 81), Zhou Yu himself is the author of the arrow-harvesting scheme. There is no fog. Cao Cao and Zhou Yu guide their boats to the center of the river to talk. When Cao Cao’s men begin shooting, Zhou Yu returns the fire and maneuvers his craft so as to collect an enormous number of arrows. The taunt “Thank you, Your Excellency” is uttered by Zhou Yu (Roberts, 1991, p. 1647). In this annotation, Roberts references PH regarding the straw-boat arrow-borrowing strategy. In PH, the credit for this strategy goes to Zhou Yu, and there is no thick fog on the river at that time. In contrast, in *San Guo Yan Yi*, this ingenious scheme is attributed to Zhuge Liang, who approaches the Cao army on a fog-shrouded river and ultimately secures over one hundred thousand arrows.

In Luo Guanzhong’s *San Guo Yan Yi*, the 46th chapter is titled “Zhuge Liang Borrows Arrows with a Clever Scheme”. The Chinese term “奇谋” implies an extraordinary and divinely inspired plan. The novel also includes an explanation of “Qimen Dunjia”, an ancient divination practice. It posits that military results can be predicted through calculations involving Yin and Yang, the Five Elements, and other cosmic elements. Practitioners believe aligning with celestial rhythms helps foresee battle outcomes and seek fortune. Later in Chapter 49, this practice is exaggerated to portray Zhuge Liang as a paragon of intelligence, capable of conjuring winds and rain.

Moss Roberts directly translates it as “A Clever Scheme”, emphasizing the plan’s shrewdness and strategic execution. Additionally, in his annotation, Roberts mentions that in PH, it was Zhou Yu who devised the arrow-borrowing strategy. This subtly undermines Zhuge Liang’s legendary status as a master strategist, restoring the historical Zhuge Liang’s image as a wise man with practical expertise to a certain extent.

Example (2)

ST: 却说孔明回船谓鲁肃曰：“每船上箭约五六千矣。不费江东半分之力，已得十万餘箭。明日即将来射曹军，却不甚便？”肃曰：“先生真神人也！何以知今日如此大雾？”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。” (Luo, 1979, p. 402)

TT: Kongming said to Lu Su, “Each boat has some five or six thousand arrows. So without costing the Southland the slightest effort, we have gained over one hundred thousand arrows, which tomorrow we can return to Cao’s troops—a decided convenience to us!” “Master, you are indeed supernatural,” Lu Su said. “How did you know there would be such a fog today?” “A military commander is a mediocrity,” Kongming explained, “unless he is versed in the patterns of the 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.” (Roberts, 1991, p. 557)

In chapter 46 of *Three Kingdoms*, Lu Su called Zhuge Liang, “先生真神人也！” Moss Roberts translated it as, “Master, you are indeed supernatural”. In the original work, Lu Su referred to Zhuge Liang as a deity, implying that Zhuge Liang was a talent with superpowers. “Supernatural” means that creatures, forces, and events are believed by some people to exist or happen, although they are impossible according to scientific laws. It’s an exaggeration. But with the following Zhuge Liang saying that he is not a mediocre man, as he is versed

in the patterns of the heavens, can recognize 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 (通天文, 识地利, 知奇门, 晓阴阳, 看阵图, 明兵势). All the above descriptions proposed by Moss Roberts show that Zhuge Liang was not actually a deity and that all success was derived from true skill and genuine knowledge.

Moss Roberts gives readers a clear explanation one by one, and helps them understand the specific significance of Chinese culture for “通天文, 识地利, 知奇门, 晓阴阳, 看阵图, 明兵势”. These concepts hold an important place in traditional Chinese culture, involving ancient Chinese philosophy, military, feng shui, divination, and other aspects of knowledge. Furthermore, these concepts reflect ancient Chinese people's cognition and understanding of the universe, nature, fate, and war, and are part of China's unique culture. Among them, “天文” refers to the knowledge of astronomy; “地利” emphasizes the understanding and utilization of the geographical environment; “奇门” involves the concepts of divination; “阴阳” refers to Yin and Yang. In Chinese culture, Yin and Yang are fundamental concepts in Chinese philosophy, representing the two basic forces of the universe, often described as the dark and light, negative and positive aspects of all things. In this context, “晓阴阳” can be interpreted as gaining insight into the natural order and the way of the cosmos; “明兵势” and “看阵图” involve the understanding of military strategy and tactics.

It is worth noting that Moss Roberts avoided making simplistic analogies between Chinese and Western astrological cultures. In the West, Chaldean-derived astrology linked celestial bodies to deities and regarded celestial phenomena as omens. In contrast, Roberts enriched the content of his translation to convey the unique symbolic meanings of Chinese cultural concepts, enabling Western readers to appreciate the cultural depth and artistic essence of the original work. This also helps readers understand Zhuge Liang as a wise man with genuine talent and learning rather than a divine figure.

Change of the Image of Morality

In Moss Roberts' translation of *Three Kingdoms*, the variations in Zhuge Liang's image as a moral man can be seen from the following cases:

Example (3)

ST: 先是东南有童谣云: 一凤并一龙, 相将到蜀中。才到半路里, 凤死落坡东。风送雨, 雨随风, 隆汉兴时蜀道通, 蜀道通时只有龙 (Luo, 1979, pp. 543-544)。

TT: Prior to Pang Tong's death a children's ditty circulated in the northeast:

Phoenix and Dragon joined as two,

Minister and general came to Shu.

Hardly halfway down the Luoxian trail,

On the eastern slope the Phoenix fell.

Winds bring rains;

Rains chase winds

When Han rises next, the road to Shu'll be free.

But when it's free, a dragon's all there'll be³ (Roberts, 1991, pp 753-754).

Moss Roberts comments in chapter 63, note 3: “Pang Tong’s death, the result of an apparently accidental change of horses and routes, may not have been unwelcome to Xuande and Kongming. See Ling Ying, *Sanguo yanyi zongheng tan* (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), pp. 148-59” (Roberts, 1991, p. 1674). This implies that Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang might have actually desired Pang Tong’s demise. Such a viewpoint challenges Zhuge Liang’s moral image and instead portrays him as envious, especially considering that Pang Tong, also known as the “Young Phoenix”, was equally talented.

Roberts’ perspective could lead readers to infer that Zhuge Liang harbored jealousy towards Pang Tong’s abilities. This interpretation alters the moral depiction of Zhuge Liang to some extent and introduces a new negative layer to his character. In chapter 46, “Zhuge Liang Weeps for Pang Tong; Zhang Fei Obliges Yan Yan,” Zhuge Liang’s deep grief over Pang Tong’s death is evident through his actions and words. The descriptions used by Moss Roberts in the text, such as “wept freely”, “wept again before continuing”, “lost his composure”, “flung down his wine cup”, “cried”, “covered his face” and “grieved” vividly illustrate Zhuge Liang’s profound sorrow and compassionate nature (Roberts, 1991, pp. 755-756). “Wept freely” means cried openly and unrestrainedly, expressing deep sorrow; “wept again before continuing” means shed tears once more before resuming, indicating continued emotional distress; “lost his composure” means became emotionally overwhelmed, unable to maintain control or calmness; “flung down his wine cup” means angrily or forcefully threw his wine cup to the ground, displaying frustration or despair; “cried” means sobbed or shed tears, showing sadness or distress; “covered his face” means shielded his face, possibly to hide emotions or to seek solace; “grieved” means felt intense sorrow or mourning, experiencing deep emotional pain. These verbs and adverbs depict Zhuge Liang’s profound grief upon learning of Pang Tong’s tragic demise, showcasing his compassionate and virtuous character.

However, these emotional expressions contrast sharply with Moss Roberts’ suggestion in the note that Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang may not have been entirely saddened by Pang Tong’s accidental death. The stark disparity between Zhuge Liang’s genuine grief and the insinuation of potential indifference on the part of Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang adds complexity to the narrative, challenging traditional perceptions of Zhuge Liang’s revered image as a moral and compassionate strategist, emphasizing the complexity and depth of his emotional response to the loss of his comrade. So, Moss Roberts’ note distorts Zhuge Liang’s moral image, highlighting the nuanced emotional depth of the characters and the complexities of their relationships.

Example (4)

ST: 却说汉中王闻关公父子遇害，哭倒于地，众文武急救，半晌方醒，扶入内殿。孔明劝曰：“王上少忧。自古道‘死生有命’，关公平日刚而自矜，故今日有此祸。” (Luo, 1979, p. 668)

TT: The king of Hangzhong dropped to the ground, grieving for Lord Guan and his son. Military officers and court officials rushed to offer him assistance. Finally the king revived, and they helped him to his rooms. “Try to stay calm,” Kongming urged him. “From the beginning of time, death has been ordained. Lord Guan’s willful arrogance caused this catastrophe.” (Roberts, 1991, p. 927)

In accordance with the principles of interpretation and annotation addition, Moss Roberts translated Mao Zonggang’s comment in Chapter 78, Note 2. Mao Zonggang asserts that “Kongming shows resentment because

Lord Guan ignored his advice to maintain amity with the Southland” (Roberts, 1991, p. 1694). This is Mao Zonggang's comment on Kongming. Mao Zonggang's original words are “以不记军师 ‘东和孙权’一语，故似有埋怨之意”。First of all, comparing the original sentence with Moss Roberts's translation, it can be found that Moss Roberts omitted the word “seemingly” (似), thus changing the uncertain tone into a definite one. From a lexical point of view, Moss Roberts translates the word “埋怨” as resentment, which in English means a feeling of indignant displeasure or persistent ill will at something, and is synonymous with the word “hatred” or “spite”. However, resentment is far deeper than a mere “grudge”. “Complain” and “grumble” are more suitable selections for the meaning of “埋怨”, but Moss Roberts did not choose these words, which shows that he deconstructs the image of Zhuge Liang as a virtuous man and builds up the image of his jealousy. Therefore, the image of Zhuge Liang as a virtuous man has been changed to a certain extent. And the portrayal of Zhuge Liang as a paragon of virtue is somewhat altered by Moss Roberts' choice of words, hinting at a shift towards depicting him as a character driven by jealousy.

Change of the Image of Loyalty

In Moss Roberts' translation of *Three Kingdoms*, the variations in Zhuge Liang's image as a loyal man can be seen from the following cases:

Example (5)

ST: 后主排銮驾出郭三十里迎接，下辇立于道傍，以候孔明 (Luo, 1979, p. 575)。

TT: The Second Emperor rode out thirty li in the royal carriage to welcome Kongming home. There he descended and stood by the side of the road to wait for the prime minister³ (Roberts, 1991, p. 1086).

In Chinese, “辇” refers to the chariot in ancient times pulled by men, with the latter specifically denoting the chariot in which the Son of Heaven or the royal family would sit. Moss Roberts, in his translation, chooses to use the verb “descended” and “stood” instead of the verb-object construction “get down the chariot and stand beside the road” (下辇立于道傍), emphasizing the actions of the Second Emperor. The term “descended” carries dual meanings: one indicating moving from a higher to a lower position, and the other suggesting an action considered beneath one's dignity. Through the use of “descended,” the translator highlights the Second Emperor's respect and deference towards Kongming.

Furthermore, in chapter 91, note 3, Moss Roberts mentioned that TS (p. 876): “... as if waiting to serve his father.” Mao: “The situation resembles Emperor Xian's reception of Cao Cao” (Roberts, 1991, p. 1713). Besides, in chapter 119 of *Three Kingdoms*, “Wrathfully, Sima Yan responded,” The dynastic altars belong to the great Han. Cao Cao coerced the Son of Heaven as a means to control the lords of the realm. He made himself king of Wei, then he usurped the house of Han itself” (Roberts, 1991, p. 1436). (“炎大怒曰：”此社稷乃大汉之社稷也。曹操挟天子以令诸侯，自立魏王，篡夺汉室。”) (Luo, 1979, p. 742). This comparison implies that Cao Cao's actions were seen as treacherous due to his coercion of the Son of Heaven to control the lords of the realm, ultimately leading to his self-declaration as King of Wei and the usurpation of the Han dynasty. In modern Chinese, the term”挟“carries connotations of threat, coercion, or force. Cao Cao's manipulation of Emperor Xian, his self-proclamation, and his relocation of the capital to Xu, transforming the emperor into a mere figurehead, painted him as a deceitful minister. Moreover, through Mao Zonggang's

comparison of Zhuge Liang and Liu Bei's relationship to that of Cao Cao and Emperor Xian, Zhuge Liang is unfairly portrayed as disloyal. This comparison tarnishes Zhuge Liang's reputation and suggests a lack of loyalty on his part.

Example (6)

ST: 孔明叹曰：“谋事在人，成事在天。’不可强也！” 后人诗叹曰：

谷口风狂烈焰飘，

何期骤雨降青霄。

武侯妙计如能就，

安得山河属晋朝！ (Luo, 1979, p. 652)

TT: Kongming sighed and said, “Men devise, Heaven decides! ‘Events cannot be forced.’”

A verse of later times expresses his disappointment:²

Wild gusts swung the fires round the gorge,

But then, from azure heights, a sudden rain.

Had Kongming's master plan achieved its end,

Could this land have ever gone to Jin?³ (Roberts, 1991, p. 1246)

Based on the principle of exposition and notes-appending, the author found that Moss Roberts added his translation of two paragraphs related to Wei Yan in the TS (*Sanguozhi tongshu yanyi*).

The following two paragraphs appear in the TS: ‘After Kongming had returned to his base on the south bank of the River Wei and settled into his camp, Wei Yan protested to him: ‘Ma Dai blocked the rear exit of Gourd Gorge. But for that Heaven-sent rain I and my five hundred men would have perished in the fires.’ (Kongming meant for Wei Yan to die with Sima Yi; the unexpected rain saved them. Later, when he was dying, Kongming left Ma Dai with a plan for killing Wei Yan.) In great anger Kongming criticized Ma Dai, saying, ‘Wei Yan is a great general. When I gave you the plan, I told you only to burn out Sima Yi. What did you mean by trapping Wei Yan in the gorge? It is our court's great good fortune that the sudden storm saved him. Had things gone wrong, I would have lost my right arm!’ Kongming rebuked him severely and said, ‘Guards! Remove and execute him’ (p. 1001). (Roberts, 1991, pp. 1727-1728)

The other commanders prostrated themselves before Kongming's tent and pleaded again and again before Kongming relented and spared Ma Dai. He had Ma Dai stripped and punished with forty strokes on the back, deprived of his positions as General Who Subdues the North and lord of Chencang, and reduced to an unregistered army servant. After this public denunciation Ma Dai returned to his former base. Kongming secretly sent Fan Jian there to inform him, ‘The prime minister knows you for a loyal and honorable general, and so he desires that you carry out this secret plan. In future your achievement will be of the first rank. But you are to blame the incident on Yang Yi so as to resolve the enmity between yourself and Wei Yan. ‘Ma Dai received the plan with enthusiasm and the following day forced himself to go to see Wei Yan and acknowledge his fault: I would never have done such a thing to you; it was planned by Senior Adviser Yang Yi.’ Wei Yan, who detested Yang Yi, went directly to Kongming and said, ‘I desire the services of Ma Dai as my subordinate commander’. Kongming refused at first, but agreed after repeated requests (p. 1002). (Roberts, 1991, p. 1728)

In this account, after returning to the south bank of the River Wei, Zhuge Liang faced Wei Yan's complaints about Ma Dai's actions at Gourd Gorge. Saved by rain, Wei Yan survived Zhuge Liang's original plan to have him perish with Sima Yi. Zhuge Liang first ordered Ma Dai's execution for trapping Wei Yan but relented after others pleaded, instead punishing him with forty lashes, stripping his titles, and demoting him. Later, Zhuge Liang secretly told Ma Dai to blame Yang Yi to ease the conflict with Wei Yan. Ma Dai followed

suit, and Wei Yan, hostile to Yang Yi, asked Ma Dai to be his subordinate. Despite initial hesitation, Zhuge Liang agreed to Wei Yan's repeated requests.

This differs greatly from Luo Guanzhong's *San Guo Yan Yi*, where Zhuge Liang valued Wei Yan for the Han cause and only gave Ma Dai a plan to deal with Wei Yan when the latter rebelled near his death. The contrast between these accounts weakens Zhuge Liang's virtuous image, suggesting a more complex and possibly hypocritical persona.

Conclusion

This study explores the significant differences in the portrayal of Zhuge Liang in Chinese and Western cultures, with a focus on Moss Roberts' translation of *Three Kingdoms*, which substantially reconfigures Zhuge Liang's image.

Regarding the image of wisdom, Moss Roberts incorporated annotations to juxtapose different story versions. Additionally, he expounded on the profound connotations of concepts associated with astronomy, geography, and other aspects in Chinese culture. As a result, this undermined Zhuge Liang's previously absolute image of being an all-knowing and resourceful figure. Instead, it made his wisdom seem more firmly rooted in reality, based on genuine knowledge and practical skills. Simultaneously, it enhanced Western readers' comprehension of the rich Chinese culture underlying Zhuge Liang's wisdom. By doing so, it shattered the one-dimensional, deified portrayal of Zhuge Liang, offering a more multi-faceted perspective. This, in turn, promoted Western readers' understanding of the traditional Chinese view of wisdom and related knowledge systems, facilitating a deeper exploration of Chinese culture in cross-cultural communication.

Concerning the image of morality, Moss Roberts made deliberate lexical choices in translating comments and descriptions. Moreover, he added suggestive annotations. This approach challenged Zhuge Liang's traditional image as an unblemished moral paragon. By ascribing negative traits to his character, it unveiled the complexity within his moral dimension, indicating that he was not a completely flawless moral exemplar. This compelled readers to re-evaluate the diversity of character moral construction in literary works, stimulating reflections on the intricate emotions and behavioral motivations of characters. In a cross-cultural context, it broadened the interpretive scope of the moral dimension of Zhuge Liang as a character.

With respect to the image of loyalty, Moss Roberts accentuated character relationships through specific lexical selections. Furthermore, he cited historical comparisons. Additionally, he included content from other texts. This cast doubt on Zhuge Liang's loyal image, presenting an aspect that deviated from the traditional perception of a loyal subject. It rendered the character more complex, with potential implications of disloyalty. This shattered the stereotype of Zhuge Liang's unwavering loyalty, prompting readers to re-consider the concept of loyalty within different historical and cultural frameworks.

Overall, Moss Roberts' translation transcends simple language transfer. It provides a new perspective for the research on the overseas dissemination of *San Guo Yan Yi*, promoting cross-cultural dialogue. Although it deviates to some extent from the original work's traditional image of Zhuge Liang as a perfect wise man, moral paragon, and loyal subject, it offers Western readers a more comprehensive understanding of Zhuge Liang in Chinese culture. His approach demonstrates a deep comprehension of the source text and Chinese culture,

contributing significantly to the global discourse on the interpretation and dissemination of classic literary works.

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