Romance of Three Kingdoms

Romance of Three Kingdoms is one of the four classic fictions and the first chaptered novel of ancient China. Based on the efforts of historians, storytellers, and dramatists, it gives a vivid account of the saga of the rise and fall of the kingdoms of Wei 魏, Shu 蜀, and Wu 吴 between 169 and 280 CE. Its influence on the Chinese psyche and culture is profound and far-reaching.

Sānguó Yānyì (Romance of Three Kingdoms), short for Sānguozhi tōngsu yānyì (Popularized Romance of the Record of Three Kingdoms), is one of the "Four Classic Novels" of ancient China and the first chaptered novel in its history. Although Luo Guanzhong is credited for writing it between the Yuan (1279–1368) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, the novel was also indebted to the efforts that historians, storytellers, and dramatists had made in the previous five centuries. Sānguozhi (Record of Three Kingdoms) by Chen Shou (233–297 CE) was the first historical record of the Three Kingdoms (220–265 CE). Shishuo xinyu (New Stories of the Past) by Pei Songzhi (372–451 CE) added more tales and legends about them. By the tenth century biased or fabricated tales about the protagonists proliferated, as in the popular Sānguō stories, which made Liu Bei the legitimate descendant of Han royalty. During the Yuan dynasty, more than forty zaju dramas depicted additional famous characters and scenarios that would eventually appear in Romance of Three Kingdoms, and later scripts for storytelling suggested a rough outline of the ultimate novel.

Romance of Three Kingdoms is a saga of the rise and fall of the kingdoms of Wei, Shu, and Wu between 169 and 280 CE. The first thirty-three chapters recount the contention for supremacy among multiple strongmen, resulting in the rise of Liu Bei of Shu, Cao Cao of Wei, and Sun Quan of Wu. Chapters 34–50 depict the decisive Battle of Chibi (Red Cliffs) leading to the sharing of power among the Three Kingdoms. Chapters 51–115 are devoted to Liu Bei and, after his death, his chancellor Zhuge Liang and his military exploits. Chapters 116–120 tell of the Sima family usurping the throne of Wei and establishing the state of Jin after conquering Shu and Wu.

The twenty-four-volume Sānguozhi tōngsu yānyì, block-printed in 1522, is the closest text to the lost original. Different editions with varied volumes, chapters, and versions appeared later. The 120-volume Romance of Three Kingdoms, edited by Mao Lun and Mao Zonggang between 1654 and 1722, proves to be the most popular among readers. The framework is largely true to history although the details are products of imaginative re-creation.

Romance of Three Kingdoms represents the highest attainment in the romance genre of Chinese literary history. It manages to weave a century's schemes and wars into an orderly, relevant, and interrelated whole. It depicts one battle after another with a well-measured flowing rhythm, analyzing the strategies used in them in great detail. Characters such as Liu Bei, Cao Cao, Zhuge
Liang, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei are so vividly portrayed that they are deeply rooted in the Chinese spirit. Some have become deities worshiped by the millions. The code of conduct promoted in the novel still guides today’s behavior in many aspects. Zhuge Liang, who is known “to spare no effort in the performance of one’s duty,” served as a role model for China’s premieres Zhou Enlai and Wen Jiabao. A part of the Chinese lexicon is also owed to the novel.

*Romance of Three Kingdoms* continues to inspire tremendous artistic and literary creativity. The novel has been rendered in various contemporary media, including television series, movies, and arcade and computer games. An eighty-four-episode television serial aired in China in 1991, for instance, while a forty-seven-episode cartoon serial ran on TV Tokyo simultaneously. The game series *Dynasty Warriors*, which is based on characters in the novel, is available for most video game consoles.

**Further Reading**


