

A Guide to Reading *Three Kingdoms*

(based on the abridged translation by Moss Roberts [University of California Press, 1999])

© 2013 Bryan W. Van Norden (brvannorden at vassar.edu)

Introduction

There are “Four Great Classical Novels” (Sìdà míngzhù 四大名著) of traditional Chinese literature:

English Title	Chinese Title	Author	When Written	Dramatic Setting
<i>Three Kingdoms</i>	Sānguó yǎnyì 三国演义	Luó Guànzōng 羅貫中	14 th century (Ming Dynasty)	3 rd century (Han to Three Kingdoms)
<i>The Water Margin</i>	Shuǐhǔ Zhuàn 水浒传	Shī Nài'ān 施耐庵	14 th century (Ming Dynasty)	12 th century (Song Dynasty)
<i>Journey to the West</i>	Xī Yóu Jì 西游记	Wú Chéng'ēn 吳承恩	16 th century (Ming Dynasty)	7 th century (Tang Dynasty)
<i>Dream of the Red Chamber</i>	Hóng Lóu Mèng 红楼梦	Cáo Xuěqín 曹 雪芹	18 th century (Qing Dynasty)	18 th century (Qing Dynasty)

Three Kingdoms (also known as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, or *Tale of the Three Kingdoms*) is a historical novel, written by Luó Guànzōng in the 14th century CE, with a dramatic setting in the 3rd century CE. The era in which the story of the novel is set includes the end of the Han Dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE), and the beginning of the Three Kingdoms Era (220-280). (The Three Kingdoms Era is the first part of the Six Dynasties Era [220-589], a chaotic period in which China was divided into various states with rival dynasties.) *Three Kingdoms* straddles the divide between history and fiction. The major characters and events are based in history. In addition, the historical roots of *Three Kingdoms* are evident in its use of the third-person objective voice, and in its tendency to provide minute details that are not essential to the work as a narrative (e.g., the names of warriors who are introduced only shortly before they die in battle). However, *Three Kingdoms* also freely fills in details that a historian would not normally have access to,

and in some cases invents stories to provide a more interesting dramatic structure (e.g., the Peach Garden Oath).

The Three Kingdoms are Wèi 魏 (founded by the son of Cáo Cāo 曹操), Wú 吳 (ruled by Sūn Quán 孫權), and Shǔ (founded by Liú Bèi 劉備). Wei occupies the area north of the Yangtze (Chángjiāng) River, while Wu occupies the area to the southeast of the Yangtze. Shu, in turn, occupies the southwest (largely modern-day Sichuan Province). Ironically, the portion of the novel that we are reading (pp. 4-280, up to chapter 50) ends with the Battle of Red Cliff (208/9 CE), before the Three Kingdoms were formally established.



Three Kingdoms has been immensely influential in Chinese (and Japanese) literature and popular culture, and has been adapted in a variety of different media up to the present day, including films, comic books, video games, and television miniseries. Almost all Chinese know the basic story. However, some versions present the story simplistically as a conflict between the virtuous Liú Bèi (aided by his honorable and brave blood-brothers Guān Yǔ and Zhāng Fēi, and his brilliant strategist, Zhūgě Liàng), the vicious Cáo Cāo, and the weak-willed Sūn Quán. However, as literary critic C.T. Hsia points out in his work *The Classical Chinese Novel* (1968), one of the most

impressive aspects of *Three Kingdoms* is the complexity of the central characters. We sympathize with Liu Bei because of his benevolence and loyalty, but it is precisely these characteristics that will lead to his downfall. Guan Yu is a paradigm of righteousness and bravery, but because of his sense of honor he lets Cao Cao escape when he has a chance to destroy him. Zhuge Liang is indeed a brilliant strategist, but his genius makes him recognize the limitations of Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei that will ultimately lead to their failure. He thus becomes a tragic character: he feels morally obligated to help Liu Bei's cause, so he marches self-consciously toward his inevitable fate. Cao Cao, while certainly ruthless, is admirably cool and calculating. He kills when he judges it necessary, but he does not engage in the reckless and imprudent violence that leads Dong Zhuo to his death.

The major philosophical and religious traditions throughout most of Chinese history are Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Buddhism came to China during the Han dynasty, and there are references to it in *Three Kingdoms*, but the primary influences in this novel are Daoist and Confucian.

Daoism

The two foundational texts of Daoism are the *Classic of the Way and Virtue*, attributed to Laozi, and the eponymous *Zhuangzi*. Some scholars distinguish between “philosophical Daoism” and “religious Daoism.” Philosophical Daoism is concerned with achieving harmony with the natural patterns of the universe. Religious Daoism is often concerned with elixirs, incantations, spells, and charms that grant magical powers or even immortality. In *Three Kingdoms*, philosophical Daoism is evident in the preference of people like Zhuge Liang to live as hermits in the countryside, close to the natural world. However, religious Daoism is much more in evidence in the narrative. For example, “Zhuangzi” appears as a Daoist immortal who gives Zhang Jue (the eventual leader of the Yellow Scarves) a book of magical techniques, which he uses in his battles against government forces. Later in the story, Zhuge Liang uses Daoist magic to change the direction of the wind.

Confucianism

There are four cardinal virtues in the Confucian tradition:

- benevolence: compassion for the suffering of others, and love of kin
- righteousness: disdain to do what is dishonorable or shameful
- wisdom: practical ability (for example, being a good judge of people, knowing the likely consequences of actions, figuring out the best strategies to achieve one's goals)
- propriety: reverence and humility as shown in the graceful performance of ritual and etiquette

All four are needed to be a completely virtuous person, but one may have one or more virtues to a certain extent without fully possessing the others. One question to ask is which characters in the novel are noteworthy for having (or lacking) which virtues?

Chinese Names

The complexities of Chinese names are one of the first obstacles to English readers of traditional Chinese literature. Chinese name order is the opposite of the Western one: the family name comes first, and the personal name comes second. (These are referred to respectively as the xìng 姓 and míng 名.) For example, the family name of Zhūgě Liàng 诸葛亮 was “Zhuge” and his personal name was “Liang.” In traditional China, literate men typically also had alternative names that were used in specific contexts. A “style” (字 zì, also called a “courtesy name”) is a nickname used to address someone by those who are his social equals but not on intimate terms with him. For example, Zhuge Liang's style was Kǒngmíng 孔明. Some people also had a “sobriquet” (hào 号), which functioned as a pseudonym. Zhuge Liang's sobriquet was “Sleeping Dragon” (Wò Lóng 臥龍). Fortunately, most characters in *Three Kingdoms* are usually referred to by one type of name. Besides Zhuge Liang (Kongming, Sleeping Dragon), the only other main character regularly called by alternative names is Liu Bei, also referred to by his style, Xuande.

Questions to Think About

- Describe the personalities (including virtues, vices, and idiosyncrasies) of each of the major characters: Liú Bèi, Guān Yǔ, Zhāng Fēi, Zhūgě Liàng, Cáo Cāo, Sūn Quán.
- How is Cáo Cāo different from Dong Zhuo? How is Guan Yu different from Lü Bù? How is Guan Yu different from Zhang Fei?
- Which ruler would you serve? Why?
- Why must Liu Bei work so hard to get the services of Zhuge Liang?
- How are women portrayed in the novel? Who are some examples of “good” woman and “bad” woman? (Consider Empress He and Queen Mother Dong, Diaochan, Lady Cai, and Liu Bei’s wife.) According to the perspective of the novel, what makes them good or bad?

Some Chinese Terms and Phrases

Yellow Turban (Yellow Scarves) Rebellion (184-205): huáng jīn zhī luàn 黃巾之亂

Three Kingdoms Era (220-280)

- Shǔ 蜀: Liú Bèi 劉備 (Xuándé 玄德), Guān Yǔ 關羽 (Lord Guan), Zhāng Fēi 張飛, Zhūgě Liàng 諸葛亮 (Kǒngmíng 孔明)
- Wèi 魏: Cáo Cāo 曹操 (actually, Wei did not formally exist until Cao Cao’s son, Cao Pi)
- Wú 吳: Sūn Quán 孫權

Two expressions derived from *Three Kingdoms*

- 说曹操，曹操到 “Speak of the devil!”
- 少不读水浒，老不读三国 “The young should not read *The Water Margin*, the old should not read *Three Kingdoms*.” (The idea behind this saying is that *The Water Margin* glorifies revolution, while *Three Kingdoms* glorifies scheming, and these are characteristics that the young and the old are already, respectively, prone to.)