

Romance of the Three Kingdoms



The Book

Written in the 14th century, Romance of the Three Kingdoms is a work of historical fiction about the turbulent division and eventual reunification of China at the end of the Eastern Han dynasty more than a millennium earlier. Covering the events of the years 169–280, ROTK is generally said to be about 70 percent history and 30 percent fiction, though that might be underestimating its fictional component.

The novel opens with a fierce peasants' rebellion that engulfs the land and plunges

an already shaky empire into terminal decline. This time of chaos, however, also opens up opportunities for men of valor to make their names and stake their claims to pieces of the empire.

Eventually, this fractured landscape congeals into three kingdoms that spend the ensuing decades being sometimes outright enemies, sometimes cold warriors, and sometimes convenient allies. Their clashes and machinations provide the backdrop for legendary deeds by figures

whose names have become immortalized over the ensuing millennia.

With a cast of nearly 1,000 characters, colorful protagonists and villains, intricate schemes on the battlefields and in the palace corridors, and endless stirring heroics, ROTK is considered one of the four great works of classic Chinese literature, and perhaps the preeminent member of that elite club. Its characters have long been icons in Chinese culture, while its famous storylines are known by heart

among the young and old alike. The novel has inspired countless works of art, operas, TV shows, movies, a long-running video game franchise, political treatises, and even a cottage industry of business advice books.

Much like the works of Shakespeare in the West, ROTK has also infused itself into the Chinese lexicon. Idioms based on the novel serve as common linguistic shorthands and cultural references. It is, in short, one of the most consequential works of literature in Chinese history.

184: The Yellow Turban rebellion quickens the Eastern Han empire's death spiral.

220: The Three Kingdoms period officially starts.

280: The Three Kingdoms period ends.



Author
Luo Guanzhong
c.1330–1400 or c.1280–1360

Photo: Wei Qinghe / Wikipedia

1300s: Romance of the Three Kingdoms is published.

The Kingdoms

WEI

220–266

Cao Cao, the prime minister of the Eastern Han court, reunited a fragmented North and controlled the Han emperor as a puppet. He never made himself king, however, leaving that to his son Cao Pi, who deposed the Han and established the Wei kingdom.

Present-day Beijing

SHU

221–263

The Shu was founded by Liu Bei, a general who claimed to be a member of the royal house of the Eastern Han dynasty and thus its true heir. After being a failure for most of his career, Liu Bei found success in the Southwest and carved out his own domain.

Present-day Hong Kong

WU

222–280

Sun Jian, an Eastern Han general, and his son Sun Ce laid the foundation for what would become the Wu kingdom. Sun Ce's younger brother Sun Quan then reigned for decades over the Southeast, constantly maneuvering between the Wei and the Shu.

Map graphic adapted from Anthology of Chinese Historical Maps

The Leading Players



Photo: John Zhu

From left: Liu Bei, Zhang Fei, and Guan Yu swear their famous oath.

Zhugue Liang

The most charismatic and important character of the novel is not one of its kings or warriors, but a minister, scholar, strategist, statesman, and all-around polymath. Thanks to the novel's depiction of him as a cunning, loyal, and almost divine figure, Zhuge Liang has attained near mythical status. He is easily recognizable by his feather fan and the hat style that now bears his name.

Liu Bei, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei

The bromance between Liu Bei, the future king of Shu, and his two sworn brothers is one of the novel's most enduring themes. The trio swore their oath of brotherhood in a peach orchard, and to this day, the phrase "Oath in the peach orchard" remains a synonym for fraternal love.

Cao Cao

As much as Zhuge Liang is known for his cunning and Liu Bei for his compassion, Cao Cao is known for his wily villainy in the novel. In history, he was actually an

accomplished statesman, commander, and poet. Due to his unflattering portrayal in the novel, however, he became the Darth Vader of Chinese culture — the ultimate villain. Nonetheless, the novel paints him with a colorful brush, depicting him as a complex



character who is, if nothing else, never boring.

Sun Quan

Described as possessing a purple beard and green eyes, Sun Quan is the leader of the Wu Kingdom for much of the novel.

Though often overshadowed in the narrative by his capable generals, his steady hand at the helm helped his kingdom survive and thrive while many other leaders drowned in the turbulent waters of the era.

Lü Bu

He has a bad temper, isn't all that bright, gets portrayed as a disloyal scoundrel, and has a thing for patricides. Yet Lü Bu has achieved legendary status thanks to his depiction as perhaps the mightiest warrior in a novel filled with mighty warriors. His reputation is evident in the Chinese saying, "Among men, there's Lü Bu; among horses, there's the Red Hare" — implying that he and his famous Red Hare horse were elite specimens of their respective species.

Sima Yi

Unassuming, calculating, and overlooked, this relative latecomer barely makes a blip when he first slips into the novel, yet ends up having a huge impact on its plot, not to mention the course of real Chinese history.

By the Numbers **111** Years covered **120** Chapters **900+** Characters **800,000** Words

The Stories

Third time is the charm

Down on his luck and essentially crashing on a relative's couch, Liu Bei hears that there's a great talent in the area who can be the answer to all his problems, if only he can convince the man to help him. But first, he has to actually get some face time with this elusive recluse, who seems to always be conveniently unavailable when Liu Bei calls. Nonetheless, Liu Bei persists in his quest, making himself an exemplar for how future leaders who aspire to greatness should court talent.

Battle of Red Cliff

Every great epic needs a David vs. Goliath plot, and the Battle of Red Cliff serves that role for the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. This battle is actually a series of engagements over a period of months between the giant army of the North and the forces of two smaller foes in the South. Filled with heroic deeds, cunning strategies, and political intrigue, this showdown essentially bends the course of history away from unity and toward a three-part division of the realm for the next 70 years.

Zhao Yun to the rescue

If you think having to singlehandedly cut through an opposing army of hundreds of thousands is tough, try doing it with your



Photo: Rolf Müller / Wikipedia

Zhao Yun takes on all comers in the fight that made him a legend.

lord's infant son strapped to your chest. Yet Zhao Yun, one of Liu Bei's top generals, simply dons his Superman cape and gets to work, cementing his reputation for posterity in the process.

Guan Yu's journey

Guan Yu, one of Liu Bei's sworn brothers, had reached a gentleman's agreement with Liu Bei's nemesis after being cornered: He and Liu Bei's wives would be unharmed if he served said nemesis. But then he got word on Liu Bei's whereabouts. Now, he sets out on a treacherous trek, determined to rejoin his brother no matter how many unlucky mid-level managers he has to cut down along the way.

Game recognizes game

When Liu Bei finds himself under the "protection" of his frenemy Cao Cao, he tries to pass himself off as an unambitious itinerant who's content to tend to his vegetable garden and thus poses no political threat. But Cao Cao sees the true man beneath the veneer, making for a most interesting (and uncomfortable) lunch conversation between the two.

Who needs anesthesia?

When Guan Yu takes a poisonous arrow to the arm, the top healer in the land comes to treat him and offers to scrape the poison off the bone. While everyone else grimaces at the mere thought of the procedure, crazy brave (or just crazy?) Guan Yu decides that anesthesia is for wusses and that all he needs for the pain is a cup of wine and a good game of chess.

Anger mis-management

Allies in name only, the top strategists for Liu Bei and Sun Quan square off in one battle of wits after another, but one of them keeps winning (and makes it look easy), while the other keeps blowing a gasket.

Beauty and the beasts

How do you get rid of a tyrannical usurper-in-the-making when his adopted son and bodyguard is an unrivaled warrior? Make them both fall for the same woman and enjoy the fireworks. But you might also want to slip on an apron for all the blood that's about to be spilled.

My big fat Chinese wedding

Grumpy about a dispute over territory, one of Liu Bei's nominal allies lays a devious trap to take him hostage and ransom him for land by advancing a phony proposal of marriage between their houses. So how does this end up being a real nuptial where Liu Bei gets a new wife, holds on to all his territory, and lives the high life for months at his host's expense? Two words (or three Chinese characters): Zhuge Liang.

From beyond the grave

Even while on his deathbed, the novel's most memorable character sets in motion a scheme that will foil and taunt his archrival one last time.



Zhugue Liang
Photo: Morio / Wikipedia

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PHOTOS:

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