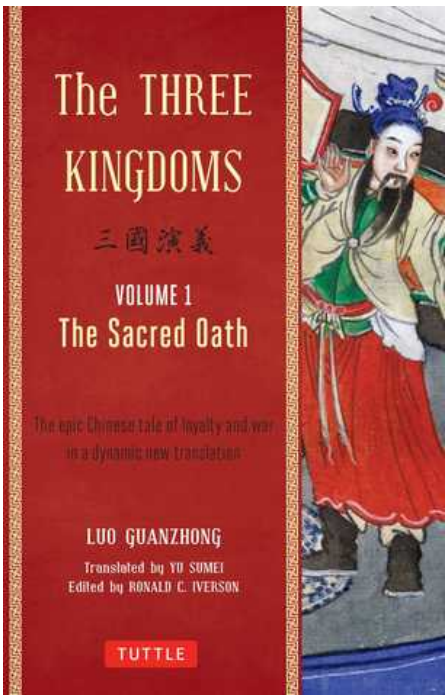

The Three Kingdoms: The Sacred Oath (The Three Kingdoms, 1 of 3)

Luo Guanzhong , Ronald C. Iverson (Editor) , Yu Sumei (Translator)

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This exciting new translation will appeal to modern readers who find the twists and turns of *Game of Thrones* so compelling.

The Three Kingdoms is an epic Chinese novel written over six centuries ago. It recounts in vivid historical detail the turbulent years at the close of the Han Dynasty, when China broke into three competing kingdoms and over half the population were either killed or driven from their homes. Part myth, part fact, readers will experience the loyalty and treachery, the brotherhood and rivalry of China's legendary heroes and villains during the most tumultuous period in Chinese history.

Considered the greatest work in classic Chinese literature, *The Three Kingdoms* is read by millions throughout Asia today. Seen not just as a great work of art, many Chinese view it as a guide to success in life and business as well as a work that offers great moral clarity—while many foreigners read it to gain insights into Chinese society and culture. From the saga of *The Three Kingdoms*, readers will learn how great warriors motivate their troops and enhance their influence, while disguising their weaknesses and turning the strengths of others against them.

This first volume in a trilogy introduces Liu Bei and his sworn brothers-in-arms Zhang Fei and Guan Yu, whose allegiance is sorely tested in a society that is in flux where each group is fighting for its survival against the other.

The Three Kingdoms: The Sacred Oath (The Three Kingdoms, 1 of 3) Details

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From Reader Review The Three Kingdoms: The Sacred Oath (The Three Kingdoms, 1 of 3) for online ebook

Robert Sheppard says

THE CHINESE THREE MUSKETEERS----FROM THE WORLD LITERATURE FORUM RECOMMENDED CLASSICS AND MASTERPIECES SERIES VIA GOODREADS—-ROBERT SHEPPARD, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

"The Romance of the Three Kingdoms" by Luo Guanzhong is one of the timeless Classics of World Literature and may be approached initially by thinking of it as a Chinese equivilant of the "Three Musketeers" saga of Alexandre Dumas. When we think of Dumas' classic we immediately call to mind from the book or film the immortal oath of brotherhood of D'Artagnan, Porthos, Athos and Aramis: "All for One, and One for All!" This becomes an archetype and ideal of Universal Brotherhood in Dumas' work and this universal archetype is echoed in Luo's famous "Oath of the Peach Garden," sworn to by the three great protagonists of the Romance, Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei:

"When saying the names Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, although the surnames are different, yet we have come together as brothers. From this day forward, we shall join forces for a common purpose: to save the troubled and to aid the endangered. We shall avenge the nation above, and pacify the citizenry below. We seek not to be born on the same day, in the same month and in the same year. We merely hope to die on the same day, in the same month and in the same year. May the Gods of Heaven and Earth attest to what is in our hearts. If we should ever do anything to betray our friendship, may heaven and the people of the earth both strike us dead."

This oath of fraternity and fidelity remains at the core of both sagas, alongside exciting adventure and thrilling action, as they respecitvely unfold across the panoramas of their disparate historical settings. The setting of the "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" is the disintegration of the classic Han Dynasty in China (206 BC – 220 AD), a close equivilant of the unified West under the Roman Empire of the same time, following the Yellow Turban Rebellion and the corruption and intrigues of the Eunuch faction, leading to the warring period of the Three Kingdoms, Wei, Shu and Wu which spelled the breakup of a unified China. Just as Dumas' heroes remain faithful to the French King and seek to strengthen the King and nation against internal and external threats, so Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei strive not only to be true to one another as brothers, but also to restore the unity and authority of a united nation and Emperor, retrieving one golden age with another, while in passing succoring the oppressed and endangered in noble fashion.

The events of The Romance, as do those of the extended saga of the Three Musketeers including its sequels "Twenty Years After," "The Vicomte d'Bragelone," "Louise de la Valliere," and "The Man in the Iron Mask" stretch across the lifetime of an entire generation and encompass several eras of history. In both cases the story is closely based on true history, with the embellishment and fictionalizing of a number of the main characters to add depth and melodrama.

The Romance commences with the corruption of the fabric of the Imperial Court and society accompanying the fall of the Han Dynasty, unfolding with the suppression of the Yellow Turban Rebellion by General He Jin, Jin's murder by the Eunuch Faction jealous of his accumulating power, the reprisal of his troops by their invasion of the Imperial Palace and the slaughter of the Eunuchs, and the abduction of the child Emperor Xian with its ensuing chaos and anarchy, accompanied by the rise of various Warlords.

Thereafter we see the rise of the arch-villan of the melodrama, Cao Cao, who plays a role parallel to that of Cardinal Richelieu, Mazarin and Colbert in the Musketeers saga, always the consummate Machiavellian political manipulator at odds with the sworn brother heroes loyal to king and country. As in the case of Dumas' tale, Cao Cao uses the child emperor as a captive pawn to consolidate his own dictatorial power behind the throne as did Richelieu and Mazarin, who made the child-King Louis XIV his pawn on the heels of the Fronde Rebellion in France which almost toppled the French monarchy around the same time as the Puritan Revolution and Cromwell in England resulted in the toppling of Charles I.

From thence a long struggle for power ensues, with Cao Cao declaring himself Chancellor, seizing power over the north of China, then attempting to finish the job with an invasion of the south. Liu Bei, one of the "Chinese Three Musketeers," however, with the help of his sworn brothers and the recruitment of the archetypal military genius General Zhuge Liang, stops his plan by defeating him at the famous Battle of Red Cliff, featuring such episodes as "Borrowing the Arrows." From there an endless struggle follows, pitting Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, aided by Zhuge Liang against the ever wily Cao Cao, and leading to dramatic episodes such as the Stone Sentinel Maze and the Empty Fortress in which Zhuge Liang's military cunning and genius is consummately demonstrated. In the course of the struggle Liu Bei emerges as the type of the ideal Lord and Zhuge Liang as the ideal general and military genius, just as Cao Cao proves himself the consummate evil political genius. Eventually, China is reunited, ending the Three Kingdoms under the new Jin Dynasty, but, Moses-like, the three sworn brothers do not live to join the triumph, nor do they succeed in the aim of their oath to die together on the same day fighting for one another, just as Dumas' heroes meet their separate deaths and their "eternal brotherhood" corrodes in disparate directions while still enduring in spirit.

In both cases, the author and the narrative imaginatively reconstructs and fictionally embellishes the true history of a long-bygone era from a remote historical vantage point. Dumas' wrote in the 1840's after the time of the French Revolution and the rise and fall of Napoleon about the period of the consolidation of the French autocratic state from the time of Louis XIII, the Fronde Rebellion and the rise of Louis XIV in the 1600's, before and afterthe rise and fall of the Puritan Revolution and Cromwell in England. Luo Guanzhong wrote from an even remoter vantage point, composing The Romance of the Three Kingdoms around 1400 or so, making him a contemporary of Chaucer in England, and during the time of transition from the Yuan Mongol Dynasty back to the resurgent Han Chinese Ming Dynasty. At that time a resurgence of native Han Chinese national feeling revived the classic tales of Chinese history after suppression under the Mongol dynasty, just as French nationalism and interest in French national history revived following the decline of the foreign-imposed Bourbon restoration and the rise of the Second Empire. Luo Guanzhong stated that The Romance was 70% fact amd 30% fictional enhancement. Dumas' tale of the Three Musketeers, inspired by Sir Walter Scott's historical novels, was based also on the factual hisorical record derived from Gatien de Courtilz's history of the Musketeers, though the fictional embellishment and dramatization might be found in similar proportions.

Both the Three Musketeers saga and the saga of The Romance of the Three Kingdoms are well worth reading for their literary and enjoyment value, beyond their historical educational function. Both have acheived the status of "Classics" in the sense not only of being masterpieces, but also having become part of the canon and, indeed, become works themselves constituative of the culture of their nations and cultures.

A mature canon and institution of World Literature must be much more than a simple buffet of recent international titles or airport-lobby bestsellers from around the world. As T.S. Eliot observed, each new work of literature takes its place and meaning within a Tradition, and such tradition evolves organically and historically and must be understood as such. It is the task of World Literature not only to call attention to good books from around the world, but to forge a canon of "world tradition" that includes the major

"Classics," led by the world-recognized Western Classics no doubt, but expanded in Goethe's ideal of "Weltliteratur" to include the "Classics" of other non-Western traditions, such as The Romance of the Three Kingdoms and Journey to the West from China, the Ramayana of India and the Arabian Nights, Attar and Rumi, amoung many others from the Islamic heritage and beyond. Every educated person in the world should have some familiarity with the Chinese classics, Indian classics, Islamic classics as well as the great Western Classics, amoung others to even begin to understand the world they live in and its peoples and living cultures. In this spirit we recommend to every member of the "Global Republic of Letters" to look into the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, as well as other Chinese classics such as the Water Margin, the Journey to the West and the Dream of the Red Chamber (Hong Lou Meng).

For a fuller discussion of the concept of World Literature you are invited to look into the extended discussion in Spiritus Mundi:

For Discussions on World Literature and Literary Criticism in Spiritus Mundi:
http://worldliteratureandliterarycrit...

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Robert Sheppard

Editor-in-Chief
World Literature Forum
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Author, Spiritus Mundi Novel
http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/17...

Garnette says

Finally, a path into The Romance of the Three Kingdoms! I've wanted to read this Chinese classic for decades and I've tried several times but I always got bogged down in a bewildering array of difficult Chinese names. John Zhu's excellent Romance of the Three Kingdoms podcast presents the story in plain English, tells me which characters (still quite a few!) I need to remember and which ones are irrelevant, and provides historical background as needed. I listen to his podcast, then read the relevant chapter of the book, then watch the 2010 Chinese television series, available on You Tube with English subtitles. This sounds time consuming and it is. But it gives me three different perspectives on this classic: contemporary American retelling, a good translation of the original, and a popularized Chinese video version. And it's addictive. Very few literary classics (this one dating from the 14th century) have inspired video games, action figures and the fanatic devotion of teenage boys. I'm thoroughly enjoying it, and talking to my husband, who grew up with the stories, about the the characters and events.

Wesley Fox says

Romance of the Three Kingdoms (ROTK) is an epic from the ancient/medieval era of China. This is a translation from the original text and you definitely get a sense of the struggles of translating Chinese into English. Some of the sentences and their structure are strange, and don't fit well. Still, one can understand it. The translator and editor also didn't try to utilize a wide English vocabulary to replace the Chinese characters. So the language is simple, repetitive and can get boring compared to normal novels.

This isn't really a novel, although the editor made an attempt to make it read like a novel. It is really a summary. If ROTK were novelized a lot of detail, context, and dialogue would have to be added by an outside source or editor, making it less a classic and more a modern invention. So we are left with short, economical paragraphs and chapters. The dialogue and narration are simple, not too different from Hemingway's style.

ROTK doesn't have Hemingway's depth and moves much faster through almost twenty years of Chinese history.

ROTK is about the fall of the Han Dynasty and the civil war between the various warlords that tore the country apart. There are great heroes, great generals, ruthless tyrants, wise advisers, and submissive women and children. You learn a lot about ancient Chinese culture, ethics, norms, and their belief in governance. It is feudal and has a very low regard for individual human life. Individual rights are nonexistent, women's rights are a joke, in fact the country recognizes polygamy. Children were more or less servants of the father.

The historical context is needed, otherwise one could read this and view all of them as bloodthirsty, sexist, violent psychopaths. By modern standards this is all true. In order to see them as heroes, villains, wise, shrewd, and get a sense of their role in the epic, you need the context.

The drawbacks to reading this is the excessive number of characters, all with similar sounding names. All of them seem to get the same rewards, same ranks, get gifts all the time, becoming fabulously wealthy. Soldiers and armies appear out of nowhere, all of a sudden one guy has an army of hundreds of thousands. I think the numbers of troops are all exaggerated. The war supposedly killed so many, Millions would be killed in a short period of time. I don't think China had that many people in ancient times. The dialogues are short and very simple. Many of the peripheral characters are one dimensional, basically big children with insatiable egos, tremendous ambition, and absolutely no hesitation in killing rivals.

It reminds me a lot of Game of Thrones. Most of the noble characters in GoT are this way as well. Martin has much better dialogue, more context, more detail, and diverse names and personalities. Still the structure of these two epics are the same. There is a little magic and mysticism in both. There are very few real heroes. One key difference is ROTK is mostly entirely about kings, lords, and nobles. Martin covers plenty of commoners in his books.

A very interesting read, but it isn't really a novel. It will be a challenge unless you know a fair amount about China, its culture, its naming conventions, and maybe some of its history. ROTK is compared to Thucydides, Herodotus, Homer, and the Old Testament in its scale and importance.

Larou says

[Note: While I am posting this under the first volume, this review really is about the whole of the novel]

First, I should point out that I am writing this review six months after finishing the novel; and while I took some notes when reading it, details are starting to get a bit hazy and I apologise if what follows is even more vague than usual. As with the previous Great Chinese Classics, both date of composition and author of *The Three Kingdoms* (also known as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*) are not known with certainty. It is generally assumed that it was written by Luo Ghuanzong (who also may have edited and maybe even written parts of *Outlaws of the Marsh*) and assumed to have been written in the latter half of the 14th century, but neither of those appears to be quite uncontested.

After having read three of the Six Classic Chinese novels before, several things about *The Three Kingdoms* struck me as immediately familiar, namely its length, the huge number of its characters and that it is set in the past. Two of these three items, however, also mark where *The Three Kingdoms* differs from the other novels: its cast of characters is insane even by Classic Chinese Novel standards, going literally into the hundreds. Admittedly, very many of those characters (again, to a much greater degree than in the other novels, even *Outlaws of the Marsh*) are introduced only to be killed off a sentence or two later – if this novel is the one with the largest number of characters, it is also the one with the highest body count. The reason for this relates to the third point, namely the time the novel is set in: While the other novels back-dated their events in order to be able to write freely about the present, placing (mostly) fictional characters in a (vaguely) historical period, *The Three Kingdoms* is a proper historical novel. It takes place during an identifiable time span, namely the periods during which the Han dynasty empire fell apart into three separate kingdoms (hence, obviously, the title), to be reunited again under the Ji dynasty only after 113 years of almost constant strife and warfare between the kingdoms.

The Three Kingdoms, then, is mostly about warfare and battles; but one of the interesting features about this novel is the way the author pays attention to the administration of war, i.e. things like supply lines and communication between troops. This marks a major difference to Outlaws of the Marsh which also featured a lot of military action (chiefly in its final parts), but there it usually took the shape of the armies' leaders meeting in single combat, and the battle was decided by which individual had the greater fighting prowess. There are scenes like this in *The Three Kingdoms* as well, but they are quite rare and often accompanied by comments like "X is a great fighter but he knows nothing about strategy, therefore he is no danger." Throughout the novel there is as much emphasis in strategy as on actual fighting – actually, even more emphasis, to the point where the importance of strategy appears as the overarching theme.

In the first volume, this mainly takes the form of the relationship between rulers and their counselors – Luo Guanzhong shows us the Han empire falling apart into a large number of warring factions, due to either rulers not listening to their good counsellors or indeed listening to their bad counsellors. One gets the impression here that being a counsellor during this period was a far more dangerous job than being a soldier as the leaders of the various faction tend to execute anyone who gives them advice they do not want to hear. This also leads to a vast array of characters passing by the reader at truly dizzying speed.

By the second volume, things have consolidated somewhat and we finally get the three kingdoms of the novel's title. That volume also sees the introduction of what is arguably the most fascinating character, namely master strategist Zhuge Liang. With his arrival, military conflicts become even more of an intellectual endeavour and battles between armies turn into battles of wit. Admittedly I have not read all that much military fiction, but have come across quite a lot of battle descriptions in my time, but I can't think of

any other example (not any in a realistic framework, that is), where the mind is consistently presented as the most fearsome weapon.

In the final volume, the circle closes, and China becomes a unified Empire again – but now not under the Han but the Jin dynasty – which, in the context of the novel which has consistently been lauding the Hans and has had all the likeable characters strive to bring them back to power – essentially means that the good guys lose.

On the one hand, there is a lot of repetition in *The Three Kingdoms* – there is after all only a limited arsenal of tricks to play on your enemy, and some strategies are employed again and again over all three volumes. (It is astonishing how almost everyone keeps falling for the old "fake a retreat to lure your enemy into an ambush" trick. You'd think people grow wary at some stage, but in this novel, they almost never do.) On the other hand, I did not find this at all troublesome and the repetitions in no way diminished my enjoyment of the novel. The reason for this, I think, is that the novel is not centered around those parts, but that they establish a kind of rhythm, form a kind of pattern which serves as the background as in an embroidery on which a variety of colourful scenes are stitched.

Scenes like this one:

> One day they sought shelter at a cottage. A young hunter named Liu An came out and bowed low to him. Hearing who the visitor was the hunter wished to lay before him a dish of game, but though he sought for a long time nothing could be found for the table. So he came home, killed his wife, and prepared a portion for his guest. While eating, Liu Bei asked him what meat it was. The hunter told him it was wolf. Liu Bei believed him and ate his fill. The next day at daylight, just as he was leaving, he went to the stables in the rear to get his horse, and passing through the kitchen, he suddenly saw the dead body of a woman lying on the ground. The flesh of one arm had been cut away. Quite startled, he asked what this meant, and then he knew what he had eaten the night before. He was deeply affected at this proof of his host's regard for him, and tears rained down as he mounted his steed at the gate.

I usually avoid quotes, but I just had to share this. Also, it gives me occasion to wonder why cannibalism in one form or another has shown up in every single Chinese classic I have read so far. It seems like the Chinese have some kind of obsession with eating human flesh – from the book on Chinese history which I read recently I have learned that cannibalism apparently did occur during several really bad famines, but I'm not sure this really explains things. And I am not the first to notice this either – there even is a Wikipedia article about it (but check out that article's "Talk" page while you are there).

This is one of the more extreme – even outright shocking episodes – but that apart it is not atypical for the kind of narrative one encounters in Three Kingdoms – tales that are on a smaller scale than the battles and power struggles but that, taken together, like colourful beads connected by the string of the historical main plot, which, as they pass in front of the reader present a parade of the society and people of 3rd century China, or at least Luo Ghuanzong's version of it. Overall it is yet another surprisingly entertaining novel which I had a lot of fun reading despite its length, age and cultural distance.

It's not however, as the book's blurb claims very likely to "appeal to readers of George R.R. Martin" which is just silly. And that is not even the most outlandish claim the edition I read makes, that would be that "many Chinese view it as a guide to success in life and business as well as a work that offers great moral

clarity.” Regarding moral clarity I refer you to the episode I quoted above, as for the rest you will have to take my word that it appear fairly bizarre claims to make. One really would have liked to find out what led editor Ronald C. Iverson to them; one also would have liked some information as the genesis of the novel, or explanations as to how far its presentation of events is historically correct. Instead what we get is – nothing. No introduction, no afterword, no explanatory notes – I really have no clue what the supposed editor was actually editing. In this respect this edition was a vast disappointment, but at least the translation by Yu Sumei made up for it. As usual, I’m not really competent to judge it, not knowing any Chinese, but it is supposedly the first English translation by a Chinese native speaker. It has some unexplained idiosyncrasies (like the consistent use of “worsted” where one would have expected “bested”) but it reads well and is free of pseudo-Oriental floweriness.

Zoe says

An interesting and at times epic view of ancient China. The translation is a bit stiff.

Wendy says

It's very long and often full of tedious military machinations, but it's also punctuated by exciting, gruesome, tragic, and otherworldy moments--so I think it's worth it. On to volume two!

JamJamee Polk says

Introduces most of the major players (Liu Bei, Zhang Fei, Guan Yu and Cao Cao in particular) and sets up the grand plotline for the set. A bit dry and overly informative at times (a plethora of names that end up not being important, etc.), but overall a pleasant read.

Ralyn Longs says

Interesting material but very difficult to read, as if the translation was much too literal, or the author took every folk tale at its word. Would not recommend.

Min Wen says

The Three Kingdoms is an ancient Chinese epic which recounts the events near the end of the Han Dynasty. This story of great heroes and great villains is deeply embedded in a people's psyche, so heavily does it influence their culture.

Traditionally Liu Bei and his two brothers are considered the quintessential good heroes, and Cao Cao as the treacherous villain. Viewed through modern lenses though, Cao Cao is really the protagonist of Volume 1 (Chapters 1-35), which details his rise to power. Blessed with both genius and luck, this is a complex

character with his own flaws and moral compass, albeit one that is skewed relative to society.

The language is slightly stiff, though I suspect that is the style of the original work as well. The plot is compelling with plenty of twists and turns, what with the generals all constantly trying to outmaneuver each other in war and battle. Overall I really enjoyed reading this.

Lauren says

Let's face it - I'm not going to finish this book.

Pranjal Yadav says

The English translation is mediocre but the content is fascinating and I am excited to read the next part. If it wasn't for the flat prose I would have given it 5 stars, but I'll contend with 3.5 stars.

There is no prose in the English translation, and the reader won't be moved even when the historical figures are suffering great anguish or making lofty proclamations that will change the course of history, the book manages to convey the story of ruination of Han dynasty of China.

My knowledge of Chinese culture was limited, and this book proved to be a good starting point to learn about the Chinese culture and get to know their values and fears. The civil wars during the last days of Hans make the backdrop of the book and bring out the all personality traits of the key figures. Even though personalities of many figures have been pointed out, the reader is able to form opinions about the figures, through the actions (loyalty, treachery, idiocy, brilliancy, kindness, sadism, empathy, apathy; all could be performed by the same figure during different circumstances) they undertake and under what circumstances. The military strategies employed speak a lot about the technology and culture of the time.

The book is quite long and the characters numerous, but you get the hang of it by putting them all up on a mind-tree based on their family names (last names are written first in Chinese culture). The practice gained by reading "A Song of Ice and Fire" doesn't hurt either.

Hikachi says

If only there's a special skill to dampen Lu Bu's provoked state so I can easily beat him and opened up a new route...

Anyway, I really like this translation. It's very easy to read. Hence, the five stars. Also, the drama~~~ duh-rah-mah! One guy deserted the long-served master while the other willing to die even though he was treated unjustly. Such political loyalty is amazing, especially at this time of the century...

I have to keep telling myself that it's a fiction. First historical fiction perhaps... I don't know... Do we count Genji Monogatari as a historical fiction too? Which one comes first?

The records of the Three Kingdoms itself is a product of a 3-4th century, about things that happened 2 centuries before. While Luo Guanzhong wrote this one in 14 AD. Which mean ten centuries after the record. Of course he took some liberties and added some characters and events. But generally, it's a retell on history.

Now I wonder if I have all four greatest Classical Chinese novels... Hmm...

Jacob says

"This exciting new translation will appeal to modern readers who find the twists and turns of Game of Thrones so compelling."

I think I just died a little inside.

Palindrome Mordnilap says

(NOTE: This is a review for all three volumes of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms)

I had been aware of this epic of Chinese literature for many years, but first developed a serious interest in reading it after having watched the excellent Chinese drama adaptation made in 2010. That gave me the impetus to pick up the first volume and give it a go.

Some words of caution first, from one who has now read all three volumes. This is a book that very much requires you to juggle hundreds of names in your head and keep track of who is who. Indeed, I would strongly recommend watching that aforementioned TV series prior to reading the books. This may sound the wrong way around, but having made my way through all 1,377 pages, it would have been considerably harder without some pre-knowledge of key characters to anchor my progress. Having some understanding, for example, that a Lu Su matters where a Lu Xun does not, certainly makes getting through the book a mite less daunting.

Another warning for those considering embarking on the Three Kingdoms: if you are not interested in military strategy and take no pleasure in reading about the minutiae of war, you should probably turn away. A significant percentage of the book is spent on detailing battles: many, many battles, often in quick succession. While war itself is not the core of what the Three Kingdoms is about, it is nevertheless the medium through which many of the story's messages are related.

This is a fictionalised account of a very real historic period in Chinese history. After the fall of the Han dynasty in 220 AD, the country fell into a state of civil war, as rival warlords fought one another for superiority - each claiming to be the rightful successor to Han. Gradually power consolidated around three separate kingdoms: Wei in the North, Wu in the South and Shu in the West. Each was led by its own charismatic leader - Cao Cao, Sun Quan and Liu Bei respectively. The Romance of the Three Kingdoms tells their story, how they rose to power, what they did with that power and how each, ultimately, fell. It is truly epic in its scale, and widely recognised in China as one of the greatest books ever written.

For me, this book is about much more than just a historic narrative. Still less is it a book merely about military tactics - although they certainly feature prominently throughout. Rather, the Three Kingdoms represents an insightful, penetrating look at power - how it can be won, how it can be maintained and how it can be lost. Each of the three rulers demonstrates different virtues and flaws, and is aided by a wide variety of generals and advisers, each with their own agendas. The ruthlessness of Cao Cao is tempered by his intellectual brilliance and his ability to exercise power without ever openly admitting to it. The virtue of Liu Bei, meanwhile, is undone by his inability to win his own battles and by his undying loyalty to those who do not always serve him best. The astuteness of Sun Quan is highlighted by the way in which he employs people best suited to the role, implicitly acknowledging his own shortcomings. Each ruler has a coterie of advisers, and the relationship between power and those who would shape and direct that power is fascinating. Zhuge Liang and Sima Yi both stand out as impressive figures in their own right, often outshining the men they exist to serve. Their interplay, in particular, is a highlight of the book. And it would be remiss of me not to mention Liu Bei's two brothers-in-arms: Zhang Fei, the oft-drunk and irascible warrior and Guan Yu, the legendary fighter who keeps his honour to his very last breath.

Another lesson the Three Kingdoms teaches is that for all the struggles and grand designs, winning or losing may very often lie in the lap of the gods. A rainstorm at the wrong moment or a change in the direction of the wind can make all the difference. Illnesses strike down otherwise undefeated veterans, just as ultimately the collapse of the three kingdoms ends up owing more to the dissipation and idleness of the rulers' successors than to any great military victory. Power is ephemeral, and it cannot ever be taken for granted.

There are so many stories and sub-plots woven into the fabric of the Three Kingdoms that it would be both infeasible and futile to assess them all here. The best I can say of this book is that it is a joy to read and its many pages a wonderful place within which to lose yourself. It is long, and there will be times when you may wonder if the battles will ever end with one siding achieving anything close to a significant victory; but stick with it and you will be rewarded.

PMP says

Stupid. Morally bankrupt. Most of the people who told you all your life that you should read this classic to learn a thing or two, have never read this themselves.
