

A CLASSIC CHINESE READER

# SELECTED ESSAYS ON CHINESE CLASSIC NOVELS

COMPILED  
BY EDITORIAL BOARD  
OF CHINESE LITERATURE  
AND HISTORY

TRANSLATED  
BY  
DA WENCHAO

 CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS

 ZHONGHUA BOOK COMPANY



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# **Introduction to Discussions about Studies on *Romance of the Three Kingdoms***

Shen Bojun and Hu Bangwei

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, studies of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* have lagged behind studies of other classic novels. Since the Sichuan Province-based journal *Social Science Research* established a special column for studies on the novel in July 1982, and particularly since the first symposium on the subject hosted in Chengdu in April 1983, the scholarly landscape has seen accelerated developments.

Several issues that have caused heated discussions



*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Manchu Version from the Reign of Shunzhi, Qing Dynasty

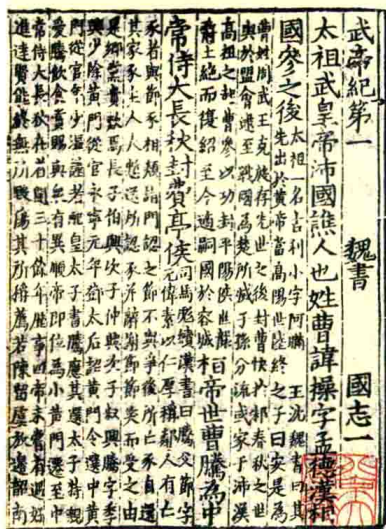
about the novel in recent years are presented below.

## I. Authorship and completion date of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

For years academics have attributed the novel to Luo Guanzhong, who lived sometime between 1330 and 1400, and have believed that the novel was written during the late Yuan and early Ming Dynasties. However this assertion is rather ambiguous in itself. In recent years scholars have been seeking a more precise time period and have proposed new perspectives, as below:

1. The novel wasn't written in the Ming Dynasty, but possibly in the Song Dynasty or even in the Five Tang period between the fall of the Tang Dynasty and the founding of the Song Dynasty. Support for this claim

was made by Zhou Cun in an article entitled “*Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is not a Ming or Qing Dynasty novel” published in the third issue of *Qun Zhong Lun Cong* in 1980. He puts forward three arguments based on a revised version of the novel by Tang Binyin of Jiangxia County. Firstly, in its Chapter 77, “The Ghost of Guan Yu Manifests Itself on the Jade Spring Mount,” the novel mentions that “Guan Yu was posthumously elevated to the Prince Yiyong Wu’an in the Song Dynasty.” The careful wording in Chinese could only make sense in that particular dynasty where certain taboos were observed. Secondly, the novel mentions Guan Suo, Guan Yu’s third son, and tells a great deal about his life and achievements. Zhou contends that stories of Guan Suo were already spreading in the early Northern Song period, or even earlier back in the Five Tang period, when the novel is believed to have been written. Thirdly, the novel has a total of seventeen geographical notes, and fifteen of them are believed to be terms known only in the Song Dynasty. This means there is no way to prove if Luo Guanzhong



Records of the Three Kingdoms, Block-printed Edition, Song Dynasty



wrote the novel. That being said, Zhou Cun's conclusion is widely challenged.

2. The novel was written in the Yuan Dynasty. The argument is well accepted and can be divided into three variations:

1). Zhang Peiheng and Ma Meixin looked into the notes of the "places as currently known" in small print, and claimed that the novel was written before 1329, or the second year of Emperor Wenzong's reign, when Luo Guanzhong was in his thirties. (See "Preface to *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*," published by Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House in 1980.) Yuan Shishuo held similar views and went further by claiming that the novel was written in the mid to late Yuan Dynasty, or between the 1320s and 1340s, while Luo Guanzhong lived between 1300 and 1370. (See "*Romance of the Three Kingdoms* from the Reign of the Ming Dynasty's Emperor Jiajing was authored by Luo Guanzhong," published in the third issue of *Dongyue Tribune* in 1980.)

2). Based on "In Memory of Mr. Zhao by his Disciples," the preface to the *Collected Works of Zhao Xie* (also known as Zhao Baofeng, a Neo-Confucianist in the late Southern Song period), Wang Liqi argued that Luo Guanzhong was known in the disciple list as Luo Ben, and that Luo lived in the Yuan Dynasty and wrote the novel in the later period of Yuan Dynasty. Wang detailed his

argument in the article “Luo Guanzhong’s *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*,” published in the second and third issues of *Social Science Research* in 1983.

3). Liu Youzhu drew on Wang Liqi’s work and studied *The Compilation of Unofficial History* by Wang Qi of the Ming Dynasty. He believed that, in the statement “Zong Xiu Luo Guanzhong, and Ge Kejiu active in the early Ming Dynasty,” “Zong Xiu” was a clerical error which was supposed to be “in the late Song Dynasty,” based on considerations of wording, glosses, grammar and logic. Therefore he came to the conclusion that Wang Qi believed Luo Guanzhong to be living in the late Southern Song period. With the support of other evidence, it’s reasonable to assert that “the novel was written in the 1340s during the first eleven years of the Zhizheng reign,” when Luo Guanzhong was in his forties or fifties. (See “*Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was written in the Yuan Dynasty,” contained in *Collected Studies on Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, published by Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences Press in 1983.)

3. The novel was written in the early Ming Dynasty, a popular argument. Ouyang Jian argued that Luo Guanzhong was known as Luo Ben, as listed in “In Memory of Mr. Zhao by his Disciples.” According to the tradition that disciples were listed in order of age, Luo Ben, at 11th place in the list, was younger than Wu Sidao

at 8th (born in 1314), but older than Wang Huan at 13th (born in 1319), which means that Luo was born between 1315 and 1318, and died sometime between 1385 and 1388. The notes in small print also help make the assumption that Luo started writing in the early Ming Dynasty and finished the first draft after 1371, or the fourth year of Emperor Hongwu' reign. At that time, Luo was around fifty-five and sufficiently competent for the work. (See "Discussions about when *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was written," contained in *Collected Studies on Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.)

4. The novel was written in the mid-Ming Dynasty. Zhang Guoguang, in his "Reasons Why *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was written in the mid Ming Dynasty," published in the fourth issue of *Social Science Research* in 1983, argued that the evolution of literature has its own course. The novel is a development of *Stories of the Three Kingdoms* from the Ming Dynasty. The existent version of the Stories was one of the five themed storytelling collections compiled by someone by the last name of Yu from Xin'an County during the Zhizhi reign (1321-1323). It represents the highest achievement in the written form of history telling at the time, but its 80,000 word text was terribly written. *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* has an 800,000 word count, ten times that of the *Stories*, and its demonstrated writing skills at the point of maturity.

That necessarily puts the writing much later than the Stories. The polished version from the reign of the Ming Dynasty's Emperor Jiajing was the first ever mature development, but it was not written by Luo Guzhong, who lived between the late Yuan and early Ming Dynasties. Instead, it was the booksellers in the mid and late Ming Dynasty that put his name on it to promote its status. It's highly likely that Jiang Daqi (alias Yong Yuzi), who wrote the preface, was the author.

## II. Subject matter

Apart from the existing theories – promoting political orthodoxy or loyalism, supporting Liu Bei against Cao Cao to satisfy the needs of the people, or documenting the rise and fall of the three kingdoms – the following eight arguments have gained in profile in recent years:

1. Glorifying idealized heroes. The novel, according to Mei Yulong, sings the praises of Liu Bei, the representative of wise monarchs, and Zhuge Liang, typical of capable courtiers. "It also celebrates at every opportunity the glories of those who are charitable, wise, brave and loyal. This glorification forms the basis of the novel." (See "On the theme of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*," published in the third issue of *Jiangxi Normal University Journal* in 1979.)



2. Praising wisdom. Zhu Shizi believed that “The novel’s theme is to be interpreted as the revelation that the power of justice will only prevail over evil by wielding the strength of wisdom, which is made possible by the description of conflicts between military and political groups during the period.” The novel portrays Zhuge Liang as the leading figure and unreservedly glorifies his unparalleled wisdom – and the writing strategy is required to highlight this theme. (See “About the theme of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*,” published in the second issue of the *Journal of Dandong Teachers College* in 1980.)

3. Advocating national unification. Wang Zhiwu argued that “The novel underlines the progressive idea of national unity. It presents a multitude of complicated historic events, from the riots in the late Han Dynasty, peasants’ revolts, separatist regimes, and the three kingdom partition to the unification of the Western Jin Dynasty, giving a lifelike picture of those periods of history. It illustrates the historical dialectic of ‘That which is long divided must unify; that which is long unified must divide’ and ‘Governance breeds chaos, and chaos ends with governance.’ It advocates the inevitable development of history towards universal unification.” (See “Views on the theme and meaning of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*,” published in the third issue of the *Journal of Northwest University* in 1980.)

Theories of division and unification have drawn similar conclusions.

4. Eulogizing feudal talent. Zhao Qingyuan believed Zhuge Liang to be the novel's protagonist. "He's the feudal talent with aspirations, ethics and capabilities that was created to Luo's aesthetic ideals, combining traits of the character as historically documented and portrayed in the folklore with astonishing achievements of real-life heroes." Luo was "praising and glorifying him with enormous enthusiasm". He "also created a large group of educated characters with practical capabilities and praised them to varying extents." Therefore, "The novel is not promoting

feudal orthodoxy or benevolent governance, but singing the praises of the true talent. The novel is a passionate ode to feudal talent." (See "A Passionate ode to feudal talent," published in the third issue of the *Journal of Anhui Normal University* in 1981.)



Portrait of Zhuge Liang  
(181-234)



Portrait of Cao Cao (155-220)

5. Presenting a tragedy. Huang Jun held that Cao Cao was depicted as a prime example of self-interest typical of the exploiting class and a real-life symbol of feudal society, while Liu Bei appears as the author's embodiment of the idealized ethics of the feudal society. The sharp contrasts between them create the most fundamental conflicts in the novel. The state of Wei's defeat of Shu reveals the bitter truth that what dominates feudal politics is not good but evil. It's not ethics, but craftiness. It's not only the historical reality of the Three Kingdoms, but also that of feudal society as a whole. Therefore, the novel tells the tragedy of the state of Shu, run by descendants of the Han monarchy. It's a tragedy suffered by the Chinese nation in tragic times. (See "A Heroic historical tragedy of the Chinese nation," published in the fourth issue of *Social Science Research* in 1983.)

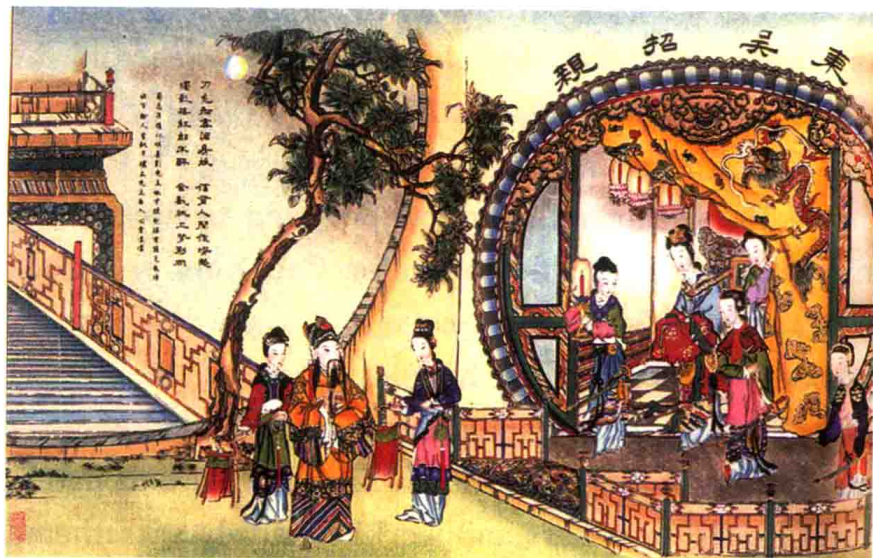
6. Appealing for benevolent governance. Shen Bojun believed that the novel obviously holds Liu Bei in high

esteem and disdains Cao Cao. It pays tribute to benevolent governance and expresses aspirations for it on behalf of the people oppressed by cruel feudalism. It criticizes and castigates tyranny. The theme doesn't only run through the novel, but is an expression of its democratic and progressive ideals. (See "Minutes of the First Symposium on *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*," published in the fourth issue of *Social Science Research* in 1983.)

7. Expecting effective cooperation between wise monarchs and capable courtiers. Cao Xuewei argued that the novel "through depictions of acute and complex conflicts during the Three Kingdom, as well as the creation of typical characters, expresses the author's admiration for and pursuit of the political ideal in which wise monarchs meet capable courtiers and work effectively with them." The author put an emphasis on their effective cooperation because it's the only way to succeed in a shared cause. The overarching message was delivered in a positive way by Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang, representatives of the state of Shu. (See "On the theme of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*," contained in *Collected Studies on Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.)

8. Promoting military expertise. Ren Zhaokun saw the novel as a vivid history of wars between the three kingdoms, in which military operations drove the plot,





Yangliuqing New Year Wood-block Print: *A False Marriage Staged by Eastern Wu*