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# Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel, Part 1



## **Synopsis**

Three Kingdoms tells the story of the fateful last reign of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220), when the Chinese empire was divided into three warring kingdoms. This decisive period in Chinese history became a subject of intense and continuing interest to historians, poets, and dramatists. Writing some 1,200 years later, the Ming author Luo Guanzhong drew on this rich literary heritage to fashion a sophisticated, compelling narrative that has become the Chinese national epic. Luo's novel offers a startling and unsparing view of how power is wielded, how diplomacy is conducted, and how wars are planned and fought; it has influenced the ways the Chinese think about power, diplomacy, and war even to this day. As important for Chinese culture as the Homeric epics have been for the West, this Ming dynasty masterpiece continues to be widely influential in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, and remains a great work of world literature. The University of California Press is pleased to make the complete and unabridged translation available again.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

First off, you have to read the full translation of this book. I read the 1976 abridged version of Three Kingdoms translated by Moss Roberts first and thought it was pretty good, but felt that the story wasn't developed enough and lacked cohesion. Then a few years ago I finally found and purchased the full unabridged version published by the University of California Press and also translated by Dr. Roberts. This is the full-blown epic from start to finish with all the details and many of the translation errors of the previous editions eliminated. The prose was also improved and flows eloquently

throughout the book's entire 3000+ pages. Three Kingdoms is the tale (part historical, part legend and myth) of the fall of the Later Han Dynasty of China. It chronicles the lives of those feudal lords and their retainers who tried to either replace the empire or restore it. While the novel actually follows literally hundreds of characters, the focus is mainly on the 3 families who would eventually carve out the 3 kingdoms from the remnants of the Han. The Liu family in the Shu kingdom led by Liu Bei, The Cao family in Wei led by Cao Cao, and the Sun family in Wu eventually led by Sun Quan. The book deals with the plots, personal and army battles, intrigues, and struggles of these families to achieve dominance for almost 100 yrs. This book also gives you a sense of the way the Chinese view their history: cyclical rather than linear (as in the West). The first and last lines of the book sum this view up best: "The empire long united must divide..." and "The empire long divided must unite..." If you are at least a little interested in Chinese history (ancient or modern) and culture this book is a must read.

"Romance of the Three Kingdoms" is possibly the most famous and important novel in classic Chinese literature. Not only is it the earliest of the "Four Great Books" (as evidenced by its more archaic language), but it created a complete cultural phenomenon whose impact is still fresh today -- just ask all the young people today who, without having read a word of the book, still know the characters from the strategy and fighting video games released by the company Koei. And how many literary works can claim to have had a direct impact on history as this book, which was used as a strategy text by the great Manchurian leader Nurhachi and his son Hongtaiji? I'd read the original archaic text when I was about eight years old, so obviously my views will be heavily slanted by my familiarity with this text. On approaching this translation, what I find is a well done, respectful and informative translation that doesn't quite nail the tone of the original text, but will be a good read for modern readers who don't read Chinese. And to be honest, Chinese is extremely hard to translate into English. Just the fact that subjects, articles and pronouns are often omitted from a sentence is enough to cause nightmares for a Chinese-English translator. And even by Chinese standards, The Three Kingdoms is a work whose linguistic economy is staggering. In one page, this book can convey the deaths of half a dozen characters, three to four battles, multiple schemes, and include four or five "tribute" poems, to boot. Such is the style of this work, and it could not have been easy for translator Moss Roberts to adapt this style into English. And he has done the job remarkably, for though I don't think he was able to convey the flavour and rhythm of the original language (the question is, also, whether that would have been possible), his translation makes a good read, and strives to be faithful to the original text, down to the chapter divisions and the

inclusion of the "tribute" poems which frequent the book. This was an essential piece in the style of the book and I was joyed to see the device retained. There are instances scattered throughout where I felt the tone of the language may have been misinterpreted, or diluted by the language barrier. Obviously, I'm not a Chinese professor (as Prof. Roberts is), but as a native speaker, I felt his translations sometimes didn't quite hit the mark. For example, in the original text, one poem on the character Cao Cao distinctly used a word which meant "deception" or "guile", but Prof. Roberts adapted it to "craft", which dilutes the disapproving tone of the original. When Yuan Shao refused aid to Liu Bei on account of his son's illness, his advice to the messenger was "if he is in trouble, he may seek refuge with me", which suggests patronage, not "find refuge north of the river", which suggests a tactical manoeuvre related to geography. These are but two examples and you can certainly argue that the meaning of the original text is up for grabs, but as a Chinese native speaker and reader, one who has grown up with this text and re-read the book hundreds of times, I still find the translation a little off. There is also no attempt at creating period flavour in the language -- the translation is modern, not aiming to add archaic English flavour to try to reflect the age of the original Chinese text. This may be a good point, however, since the use of archaic English added to the language barrier might have resulted in a book that's very difficult to read. I think Prof. Roberts sacrificed flavour for clarity, a fair tradeoff to the benefit of the translation. Again, the question is whether an English translation (or any other translation) could ever be accurate in this way to the original. Personally, I do think many of the discrepancies in meaning could have been avoided, or ameliorated. However, as aforementioned, for a reader who's never read the original, this issue won't affect his/her enjoyment of the text. Just the fact that there is a translation of this extremely important work of Chinese literature is a cause for celebration, and for those people new to this realm, this set of books is a great discovery.

I first became intrigued with the Three Kingdoms's historical events when I played the game Dynasty Warriors 2 for PS2. Afterwards I was desperately searching to find the best novel translation and finally bought the 4-volume box set translated by Moss Roberts which is the UNABRIDGED version (make sure to get this edition as it tells the whole story w/o leaving anything out). I then set out to explore the 2200+ pages of Chinese history and I must say, it was a fascinating experience. I initially grasped what was going to happen in time but there was so much other details to the story and idealisms portrayed. Leadership, loyalty, heroism, military tactics and warfare, treason, and even romance play such a significant role in this epic novel. "The empire long united, must divide" and "the empire long divided, must unite" pretty much opens and closes the novel

perfectly. Heroes such as Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun, and Huang Gai portray such loyalty that it would be kind of hard to imagine in today's society. From the other reviews I've read, most people think Liu Bei (Xuande) is the protagonist of the novel and this seems very true since Roberts lauds Bei's characteristics and portrays Cao Cao of the evil and cunning type. Personally, I think anyone can choose their personal protagonist and for me that would be Zhao Yun because of his undisputed bravery and loyalty. Another character that I admired was probably Zhuge Liang for his awe-aspiring military tactics. Zhuge was the best strategist of his time and he wrote several books on warfare but unfortunately, most were destroyed but you can still buy one of his famous books, "The Art of War." Warning, spoiler ahead: This book has its sad moments particularly when someone important or someone who contributed a lot to his lord dies. You'll feel sympathetic towards those who fought hard as well as the ones who died. When the book starts, it's during the impending collapse of the Han then around 220 is when the real three kingdoms come into play: Shu, Wu, and Wei. It's sort of like a battle to the death of who would emerge victorious and indeed there was. Military tactics are exploited on each side and betrayal is widespread. In the end, it would be Sima Yi's family who would unite China under one rule, the Jin Dynasty.

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