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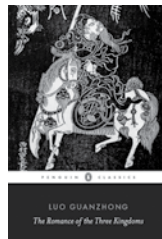
## *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

**Luo Guanzhong**

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China has a rich history spanning four to five thousand years. Despite periods of instability and internal warfare, stories and myths from the people have inspired well-known works like this book which was first published in 1522 AD. It has been translated into English and many other languages. It is attributed to Luo Guanzhong and is in the genre of historical fiction. The Romance of the Three Kingdoms is set during the last years of the Han dynasty and the turmoil between warlords that followed, resulting in the division of China into three states. The book is known for its unique blend and is considered a masterpiece due to its unforgettable characters, epic battles, and enduring impact on Chinese society.

In 168 AD, the Han dynasty was ruled by corrupt eunuchs, causing famine. In 184 AD, a Daoist cult led an uprising called the Yellow Turban Rebellion. Warlords grew more robust, and central power weakened. In 190 AD, warlords formed a coalition to overthrow the cruel warlord Dong Zhuo and save the puppet emperor. This led to a period from 190 AD to 220 AD of warlords fighting for power and lands, with epic battles, duels, intrigues, and love stories.

In 220 AD, Cao Pi declared himself Emperor of Wei after his father's death, ending the Han dynasty. Sun Quan then proclaimed

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himself Emperor of Wu, and Liu Bei declared himself emperor of the restorationist Shu-Han dynasty, kickstarting the Three Kingdoms period. After a balance period, all three kingdoms suffered from incompetence and corruption. Sima Yi and his sons usurped the Wei throne and created the Kingdom of Jin, conquering Shu-Han and Wu, reuniting China under the Jin dynasty by 280 AD.

The Romance of the Three Kingdoms features over a thousand named characters, including Sun Quan of Wu—embodying filial piety and the Confucian dilemma between righteousness and legitimacy. Brotherhood is another central theme in the novel, with Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei swearing an oath to protect the empire at all costs.

The essence of the novel is the power balancing between the three kingdoms which arise from the fragmentation of the previous large unified kingdom of China ruled by the Han dynasty. The novel has heavily influenced Chinese leadership through the ages, and many have stated the influence of the work on their policies. Mao Zedong, who was deeply influenced by the book, used it to exalt his soldiers. One character in the book, the genius Zhuge Liang devises a brilliant plan to give a weaker faction—the Liu Bei—the final victory. Mao used such stratagems during the Cold War period and even subsequently Mao's successors managed to maintain the balance between the other two superpowers, as Mao's idea even outlived him.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has in speeches throughout his career referred to the Three Kingdoms while addressing or exhorting the Chinese people.

The Wu kingdom led by Sun Quan aimed only for regional hegemony, which it fiercely defended at the Battle of Chibi. This kingdom had no design to dominate the world. Today, China aims to be the regional hegemon of Asia, using military strategies and forging partnerships with countries like Russia to counter the influence of the US.

The Wei Kingdom in the Three Kingdoms represents tyranny. It was led by the ruthless Cao Cao, who used alliances to subjugate neighbouring states but broke his word if it suited him. Similarly, China uses economic influence to coerce weaker states, demanding natural resources.

The Shu Kingdom embodies the humane authority led by Emperor Liu Bei, a virtuous and benevolent man who had a circle of faithful strategic advisors. China's international engagement includes the One Belt One Road project, which links China with Central Asia, Europe, and South Asia. In Chinese perception, the One Belt One Road project is benevolent, contrary to what the world perceives.

China's international behaviour can be studied using the Three Kingdoms framework. In modern times, China has displayed characteristics of each kingdom. While it aims to be a wise and humane authority like Liu Bei, its coercive economic policies towards its neighbours are like of the tyrant Cao Cao. Additionally, its attempts to exert regional leadership are aligned with Sun Quan's desire to be a regional hegemon. The Three Kingdoms analogy can help us understand China's actions within its culture and history. Analysing it can provide insights into China's future behaviour and ambitions within the world order.

A timeless classic like many other epics of various cultures it is a must-read for students of Chinese strategic thinking.