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Romance of the Three Kingdoms

Luo Guanzhong



Series Thirteen

Romance of the Three Kingdoms by

LUO GUANZHONG

(c. 14th century)



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三國演義

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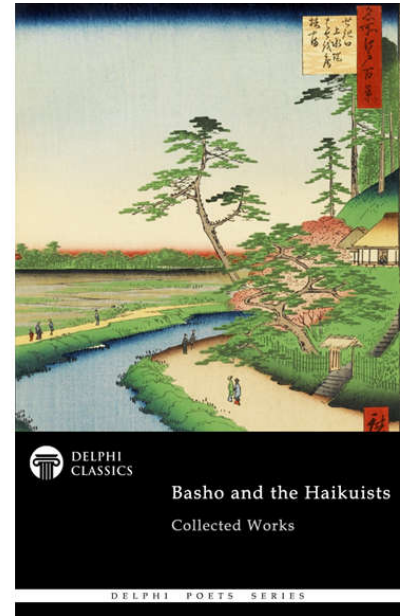
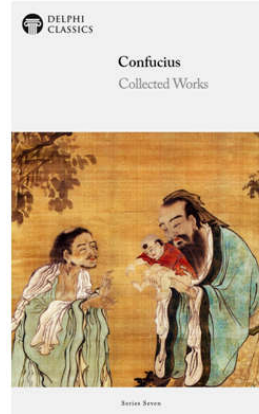
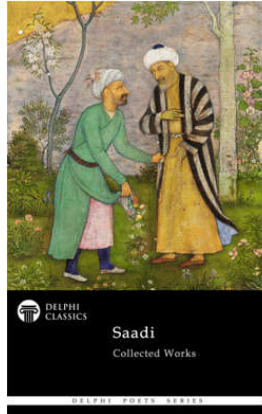
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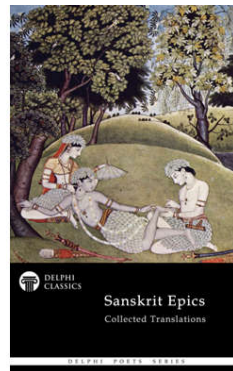
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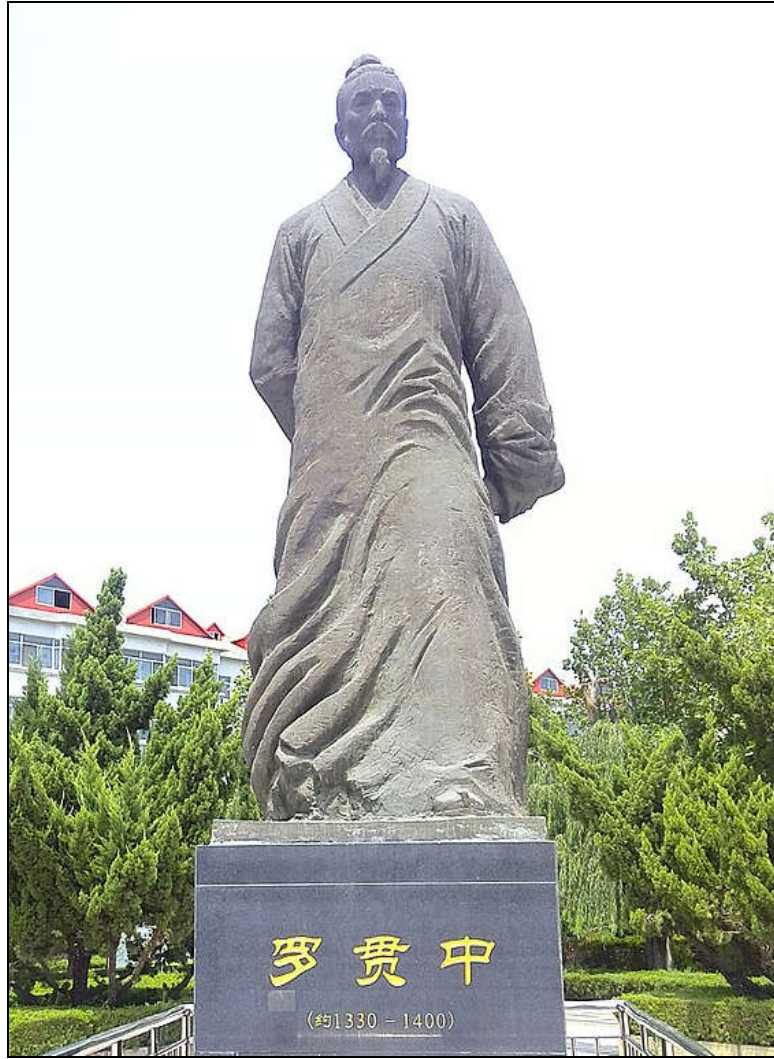
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The Novel



Taiyuan, the capital and largest city of Shanxi Province, China — possible birthplace of Luo Guanzhong



Statue of Luo Guanzhong in Dongping Lake Square in Dongping County

Romance of the Three Kingdoms



Translated by Charles Henry Brewitt-Taylor, 1925

One of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature, the historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is attributed to Luo Guanzhong (c. 1330-1400), a Chinese playwright that lived during the Ming dynasty. Largely sourced from the third century text of *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, the narrative is set against the backdrop of the turbulent years at the end of the Han dynasty and the Three Kingdoms period, starting in 184 AD and culminating with the reunification of the land in 280 by Western Jin.

Romance of the Three Kingdoms comprises a total of 800,000 words and nearly a thousand dramatic and mostly historical characters in 120 chapters. It is among the most beloved works of literature in East Asia and its literary influence in the region has been compared to that of the works of Shakespeare on English literature. It is arguably the most widely read historical novel in late imperial and modern China. Part historical, part fictional, the novel dramatises the lives of feudal lords and their retainers, who are trying to restore the dwindling Han dynasty. Although it charts the exploits of hundreds of characters, the principle focus is on the three power blocs that emerged from the remnants of the Han dynasty and would eventually form the three kingdoms of Cao Wei, Shu Han and Eastern Wu. The text deals with the plots, personal and military battles, intrigues and struggles of these states to achieve dominance, during a period of almost 100 years.

One of the most celebrated achievements of the novel is the extreme complexity of its stories and characters, boasting numerous subplots. The first chapter features the story of the Ten Attendants' usurpation of power and the Yellow Turban Rebellion, which destabilised the Han Empire. When the Yellow Turban rebels are advancing on You Province, the governor posts a conscription notice in Zhuo County. Liu Bei, a 28-year-old distant descendant of the empire's ruling house, reads the notice and heaves a long sigh. He is scolded by Zhang Fei, a butcher, for not serving the country. Liu Bei then shares his aspirations of saving the country and the people, and the butcher suggests they should recruit a voluntary militia to combat the Yellow Turbans. While drinking at a restaurant, they meet Guan Yu, who is on his way to join the army. Liu Bei tells him about their plan and the three men make their way to Fei's home to discuss their plans. Zhang Fei suggests they should conduct a sacrificial ceremony to heaven and earth and take an oath as brothers under blossoming peach trees in his garden, to which Liu Bei and Guan Yu agreed. The 'Oath of the Peach Garden' is one of the most famous events of the novel. The three friends make the following vow: "We were not born on the same year of the same month of the same day but we pledge to die on the same year of the same month of the same day together. Whoever breaks the oath will die." Liu Bei, Zhang Fei and Guan Yu then join the army and receive their weapons.

One of the novel's chief themes is the nature of human ambition, as well as the relationship between politics and morality, specifically the conflict between the idealism of Confucian political thought and the harsh realism of Legalism (the strict adherence to the letter of the law rather than its spirit). Other dominant themes include the rise and fall of the ideal liege (Liu Bei); finding the ideal minister (Zhuge Liang); the conflict between the ideal liege (Liu Bei) and the consummate villain (Cao Cao);

and the cruelties and injustice of feudal or dynastic government. Indeed, the opening lines of the novel, “The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been”, added by Mao Lun and Mao Zonggang in their recension, epitomise this tragic theme.

Romance of the Three Kingdoms often takes a political and moral stand and clearly hints to the reader which characters are heroes and which are villains. Still, the heroes are forced to make a tragic choice between equal values, not merely between good and evil. They know that the end of the empire is ordained by this cosmic cycle of division and unity, yet their choices are moral, based on loyalty, not a political ideology. A cyclical theory of dynastic decline permeates the work, relating the inevitable breakdown of order at the end of the Han dynasty, largely due to the improper exercise of imperial authority, the destabilisation influence of special-interest groups (e.g. by eunuchs and imperial clansmen) and the problem of factional and individual idealism that results in civil strife.

This edition of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* features the 1925 translation by Charles Henry Brewitt-Taylor, a long time official of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service. It was the first complete English translation to be published and it is widely regarded as being faithful to the original text.



'Three Heroes of Three Kingdoms', silk painting by Sekkan Sakurai, c. 1780, depicting Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei



Old Chinese print illustrating the famous Peach Garden scene

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'Liu Bei recruiting Zhuge Liang, from Visiting the Thatched Hut Three Times', a Ming dynasty painting by Dai Jin, c. 1450

是書也刻已數種悉皆謬外
 芥味魚魯觀者莫辨于深憾
 焉輒購求古本致請名士按
 鑑參攷再三雙校俾句讀有
 圖點難字有音註地里有釋
 義典故有考證缺略有增補
 節目有全像如牖之啓明標
 之示準此編之傳士君子庶
 卷心目俱融自無畱難誠與
 諸刻大不侔矣覽者願誤書
 而求諸斯為奇貨之可居
 萬曆辛卯秋月周曰校謹識

今像三國

書林周曰校刊

志傳演義

古本
 全像

三國志通俗演義

古本
 全像

三國志通俗演義

古本
 全像

三國志通俗演義

A 1591 edition of the novel

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE



THE *SAN KUO* is distinctly Eastern, a book adapted for the storyteller; one can almost hear him. It abounds in names and genealogies, which seem never to tire the Eastern reader or listener. Happily, English admits pronouns in place of so many strangely spelt names which ought to appear, and they have been used; and as most persons have at least a *tzu* in addition to the *hsing* and *ming* I have tried to lighten the burden on the foreign reader's memory by using only the *hsing* or the *hsing* and *ming* of a man, suppressing his *tzu* except in the case of very well-known characters.

Manchu, Japanese, Siamese, and possible other versions of the *San Kuo* have been made, and now to these I have attempted to add one in English, with what measure of success I leave to curious readers qualified to compare my rendering with the original.

The Wade system of romanisation, in which the vowels are pronounced as in Italian, has been used.

In conclusion, I wish to put on record my gratitude to Mr. Chen Ti Tsen, who typed the text, and Mr. E. Manico Gull, who has read the proofs, and to dedicate this translation to the memory of my son Raymond.

C. H. BREWITT-TAYLOR

CHAPTER I DELPHI  CLASSICS

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