

Paper Presented at 6<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Korean Studies

Historical Novel Revived Overseas: Heyday of  
*Romance of Three Kingdoms* in Korea and East Asia

Hyuk-chan Kwon

Assistant Professor, City University of Hong Kong

My research explores how the *Sanguozhiyanyi* 三國志演義 (Romance of the Three Kingdoms; hereafter *Three Kingdoms*) has become increasingly popular in Korea and East Asia as a cultural product. Having elucidated the cultural politics that made *Three Kingdoms* into a national novel of Korea in my dissertation, I also examine *Three Kingdoms* narratives in other “less serious and more stimulating” forms, which include various *Three Kingdoms*-related cultural products such as films, drama series, comic books (both printed manga and animé), computer games, and internet role-playing games. *Three Kingdoms* has become a “one-source multi-use” product, whose modern translators and producers have brought about the contemporary heyday of a work that first appeared more than four hundred years ago. More specifically, among the copious number of *Three Kingdoms*-based computer games, I examine the case of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* series by the Japanese video game publisher, Koei. I elucidate the cultural politics that contribute to making *Three Kingdoms* the most important game in terms of recreating the key events in Asian history and representing hundreds of historical personages such as Liu Bei, Cao Cao, and Zhuge Liang.

I also examine how the players of the games often attempt to accommodate new *Three Kingdoms* revisions enhanced with more liberated and imaginative interpretations and re-creations in terms of adaptations of console games and Internet role-playing games such as *Dynasty Warriors* series (真三國無雙) released by Koei and MMORPG versions of the original work.

In this context, my goal is to contribute case studies that will illuminate the interplay between traditional literary and popular youth cultures in an East Asian context.

This paper examines *Three Kingdoms*' enduring popularity as reflected in contemporary Korean popular culture and literature as well as in East Asia. The ever-increasing popularity of *Three Kingdoms* today can be attributed, in part, to the relentless modification and re-creation of its contents by authors for whom the novel functions as a yardstick for measuring prestige with readers of all generations.

In contemporary Korea, it is virtually impossible for a modern Korean to lead a life divorced from *Three Kingdoms*, whether one desires to or not. Even given that male readers tend to show a more apparent mania for the work in general<sup>1</sup>, people of all backgrounds are nonetheless affected by *Three Kingdoms*, noticeably in terms of its cultural and sociopolitical authority in modern Korean society. Virtually all people come into contact with certain types of *Three Kingdoms* reproduction at some point in their life. Those who develop a predilection for the work are expected to continue consuming *Three Kingdoms*-related cultural products, and while doing so, they tend to go through several distinct stages in terms of their readership. *Three Kingdoms* is an exceptional work in that it has remained popular for some four hundred years (and counting) and is still welcomed by the general reader. Moreover, it has developed into a continuously evolving creation based on collaborative work reflecting feedback from numerous readers and appreciators of the work. In other words, to its many fans it has evolved into a cultural product of enduring fame.

---

<sup>1</sup> Refer to the study by Yi Sŭngch'ae, "Taehaksaengdŭlŭipanboktoksŏkyŏnghŏm e kwanhanyŏn'gu" (A Study on Repeat Reading Practice of Korean College Students).

In contemporary Korea (and East Asia), the reader of *Three Kingdoms* increasingly becomes exposed to rewritings of the work other than the traditional one read initially; they often unfold distinct interpretations contrary to Shu-Han legitimacy. Among the numerous Korean versions of *Three Kingdoms* available, many provide readers with opportunities to compare the historical facts with their fictitious manipulations in the novel<sup>2</sup>. After learning of the gap between the realities of the historical figures and the fictional characters in the novel, many readers become somewhat sympathetic to the figures whose historical images are deliberately distorted and stigmatized in the original novel. The increasing tendency of modern Korean *Three Kingdoms* revisions to set Cao Cao as the real hero or the main protagonist instead of Liu Bei is a case in point.

The tendency noted above escalates to the point where the reader develops a preference for revisions that are based strictly on historical fact rather than on the traditional novel. Some readers deliberately favor such revisions as portray characters in the work in reverse. That is, they enjoy observing the positively depicted characters and

---

<sup>2</sup> For example, each chapter of Yi Munyŏl's version of *Three Kingdoms* ends with his appended critical notes, which often provide comparisons of specific occasions in the novel with historical accounts. In *SōtenKōro* 蒼天航路, a Japanese Manga by King Gonta and Yi Hag'in based on *Three Kingdoms*, the storyline primarily uses the original historical account of the era, *Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms* by Chen Shou 陳壽 as a reference rather than the *Three Kingdoms* novel. Li Tonghyŏk's recent translation of the novel compares differences between each major edition of *Three Kingdoms* with each other and with historical accounts, both in the form of brackets in the translated text and with critical notes appended to the end of each chapter.

the negative figures in the original work reversing their character roles in terms of the dichotomy of good and evil.<sup>3</sup>

Then, the reader often comes to accumulate near-expert or even expert knowledge of *Three Kingdoms*, which includes detailed knowledge of the discrepancies between historical facts about the Three Kingdoms period of China and the novel, the revisions made to major editions of the novel, and how historical figures and their deeds are reflected in the protagonists in the work. Such a high level of expertise is made possible by the emergence of numerous *Three Kingdoms* reference books, websites and

---

<sup>3</sup>*SōtenKōro* is a case in point for its highly positive portrayal of its main character, Cao Cao, who is traditionally the antagonist in *Three Kingdoms* and in many of its revisions. By the same token, Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang, the traditional heroes of *Three Kingdoms*, take on relatively less importance and are portrayed in a less positive light. As a matter of fact, in this Manga revision, contrary to the original novel, Kongming is often defeated by Cao Cao in terms of military strategy and leadership, and grows excessively jealous of him. Quite a few role-playing games based on *Three Kingdoms* also treat the heroes who received less attention in the original work--namely the heroes of the states of Wei and Wu-- as equal to or sometimes even more important than the traditional heroes of the House of Shu-Han. By doing so they provide the game players with opportunities to play as many heroes in the role of protagonist as possible, thereby enhancing the so-called multi-play function. This approach also appeals to devoted gamers, who tend to have a more detailed and objective knowledge of historical accounts of the Three Kingdoms period. As the example of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*, Koei's famous *Three Kingdoms*-based game series shows, these *Three Kingdoms*-related games often provide dictionaries (embedded in the game) for all characters in the game plot as well as illustrated history of *Three Kingdoms* period. These are provided to help game players become acquainted with the game more easily, also culminating in enhancing game players' *Three Kingdoms*-relevant knowledge.

digital databases.<sup>4</sup> The reader often attempts to accommodate new *Three Kingdoms* revisions enhanced with more liberated and imaginative interpretations and recreations in terms of translations or adaptations of the novel, console games, Internet role-playing games, cartoons, and animations. At this stage, the reader's primary concern, in most cases, is not how characters are portrayed in the revised work, whether positively or negatively, but whether the revised work demonstrates a high level of achievement as an independent complete work. In fact, they are willing to accept uninhibited interpretations of the characters, such as altering the gender of the characters in the original work. This tendency is more apparent in *Three Kingdoms*-based comics, animations, and computer games than in translations or other written adaptations of the

---

<sup>4</sup> Such reference books include "*Samguk chi*" *haeje*, the thickest Korean reference book on how to read *Three Kingdoms* at 621 pages (date of publication: 2003). It was co-authored by Kim Unhoe, Chang Chŏng'il and SŏTonghun and appeared shortly before Chang published his translation of *Three Kingdoms* based in part on the research he and his co-authors had done. In 2004, one of these co-authors, Kim Unhoe, published another reference book on how to read *Three Kingdoms*, titled *Samgukchiparoilkki* (How to Read *Three Kingdoms* Properly), in which he strongly asserts that *Three Kingdoms* stimulates the aggressive nationalism of the Chinese (as indicated with the Northeastern Project) and asserts that Koreans should not take the novel at face value.

Yi Tonghyŏk, in his "*Samguk chi*" *kaulgoinne* (Cry the *Three Kingdoms*), points out numerous embarrassing errors in Yi Mun'yŏl's and Hwang Sŏg'yŏng's translations of *Three Kingdoms* and also provides historical references for the work. Later on (in 2006), Yi published his 10-volume translation of the novel. Thus, the tradition of books on how to read *Three Kingdoms*, initiated by critics such as Jin Shengtan, Li Zhi, and Mao Lun and Mao Zonggang, is being continued in modern Korea by prominent writers and scholars, who both publish reference books to the novel and provide commentaries and critical notes in their translations.

novel. For example, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Zhuge Liang have been portrayed as women in several revised works.<sup>5</sup>

(Illustration deleted due to copyright issue)

**Figure 1 Zhang Fei portrayed in the traditional way in the Playstation 2 version of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms***

*Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sangokushi* 三國志) is the eleventh installment of [Koei](#)'s famous *Three Kingdoms*-based game series released in 2006.

(Illustration deleted due to copyright issue)

**Figure 2 Zhang Fei as a young female general in futuristic attire in *Samgukchangunchŏn* (Seoul: Champ Comics, 1997-present), 5: 60.**

(Illustration deleted due to copyright issue)

**Figure 3 Xiahou Dun 夏侯惇, a famous one-eyed general on Cao Cao's side portrayed in a traditional way in *Dynasty Warriors X* (真三國無雙 5), released by Koei.**

---

<sup>5</sup>Zhang Fei, one of the most masculine characters in *Three Kingdoms*, is portrayed as a young female general in a *Three Kingdoms*-based Korean comic, *The Story of Three Kingdoms Generals* (*Samgukchangunchŏn* 三國將軍傳) written by Pak Suyŏng (Seoul: Champ Comics, 1997-present). *KoihimeMusō: DokiOtomeDarake no SangokushiEngi* (恋姫†無双〜ドキッ☆乙女だらけの三国志演義), a Japanese animation and strategy game released in 2007 by BaseSon, portrays all main characters save Liu Bei as cute young girls. (Official website available at <http://www.mmv.co.jp/special/koihime>.) A Korean website for animated versions is available at <http://bestanime.co.kr/newAniData/aniInfo.php?subPageType=character&idx=2948&viewType=&initialKey=&page=>.)

(Illustration deleted due to copyright issue)

**Figure 4**Xiahou Dun as she loses her eye in battle in *KoihimeMusō: DokiOtomeDarake no SangokushiEngi*.

(Image available at <http://www.mmv.co.jp/special/koihime>.)

With their accumulated knowledge and broad understanding of the work, readers come to acknowledge that creations and revisions of *Three Kingdoms*, a historical novel, are reflections of contemporary people's sentiments and wishes as affected by the sociopolitical conditions of the time when the work was created, and that such modifications to the work have occurred gradually for hundreds of years through the collaborations of numerous people. Readers reach a certain type of transcendence whereby they can countenance any kind of revision or re-creation of the work without becoming overly agitated or offended.

These sequential phases of *Three Kingdoms* reception are best observed in reader responses, often in the form of online reviews of distinct translations of *Three Kingdoms*, *Three Kingdoms*-based games, comics, and animations. It should be noted that each reader/player/viewer divulges distinct circumstances in terms of his or her experiences of repeated reading, or playing, or viewing of the work. One might start his acquaintance of *Three Kingdoms* by watching animations and move on to reading a certain translation of the novel, which then leads to another. Alternatively, one might become acquainted with the work by reading a certain critical interpretation of the novel and grow curious about the original work.

Some readers (male readers in many cases), even after going through numerous revisions and reference materials about the work, tend to stay at the basic level in which their favorite topic about the work turns out to be the comparison of the level of the martial arts prowess and intelligence of the characters in terms of numerical points. As a matter of fact, ranking of the characters based on a point system has been a fundamental factor for *Three Kingdoms*-related computer games (both online and console). For example, in terms of points for martial valor (*wuli* 武力), Lǔ Bu often acquires the full score (100), followed by 99 points for Guan Yu. Accordingly, for intelligence, Zhuge Liang perennially scores the highest points (100), followed closely by Pang Tong's 99 points.<sup>6</sup>

(Illustration deleted due to copyright issue)

**Figure 5** Playstation 2 version of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*, the eleventh installment of Koei's famous *Three Kingdoms*-based game series released in 2006

(Illustration deleted due to copyright issue)

**Figure 6** Lǔ Bu in the character dictionary in the computer game *The Romance of Three Kingdoms XI* (Korean edition)

(Illustration deleted due to copyright issue)

**Figure 7-8** Zhuge Liang introduced in the character dictionary in the computer game *The Romance of Three Kingdoms XI*

---

<sup>6</sup> Among the copious number of *Three Kingdoms*-based computer games, *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* series by the Japanese video game publisher, Koei, is the most well-known; all such games tend to apply numerical point systems to measure the abilities of characters in the game.

Figures 7 and 8. Lú Bu and Zhuge Liang introduced respectively in the character dictionary in the computer game, *The Romance of Three Kingdoms XI* (Korean edition). Lú and Zhuge are the only characters in the game who scores a full (100) points for their martial valor (second column) and intelligence (third column), respectively. The dictionary also says that in history Zhuge is remembered as a great politician rather than as a great strategist.

This rather unsophisticated ranking of *Three Kingdoms* characters can be observed not only among adolescent users of *Three Kingdoms* computer games, but also in serious academic research conducted by scholars. A team of six scholars in Korean literature at The Centre for Korean Studies of Inha University, upon performing a two-year research project on Korean translations of *Three Kingdoms*, announced their nominations for the Top Ten Warriors in terms of martial valor (*muryöksipköl* 武力十傑) and Top Six Strategists (*mosayukköl* 謀士六傑) in 2005.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>This ranking was published in a news article by Seoul Sinmun in 2005. (Article available at <http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=103&oid=081&aid=0000037460>). The Top Ten Generals are Lú Bu 呂布, Guan Yu 關羽, Zhang Fei 張飛, Zhao Zilong 趙子龍, Ma Chao 馬超, Huang Zhong 黃忠, Wei Yan 魏延, Xiahou Dun 夏侯惇, Xu Zhu 許褚, and Dian Wei 典韋, respectively. The top Six strategists include Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮, Pang Tong 龐統, Sima Yi 司馬懿, Lu Xun 陸遜, Xun Yu 荀彧, and Jia Xu 賈詡, respectively.

It is notable that all Five Tiger Generals (五虎大將) of the state of Shu dominate the highest ranks, with the exception of Lú Bu, a legendary general who fought the three sworn brothers concurrently in the novel. Also noteworthy is that not a single general of the

This example demonstrates that even the researchers of the novel are highly likely to be devoted fans as well. Ardent fans of *Three Kingdoms* have a mania for the work that rivals that of fans of the Star Wars series. Numerous Star Wars fans seek out sequels after watching the initial installment and mostly end up watching all sequels, prequels, and ‘director’s cut’ special editions; they also end up purchasing Star Wars-related toys, souvenirs, animations, and games. Likewise, ardent devotees of *Three Kingdoms* continue to consume *Three Kingdoms*-related products, which include various versions of *Three Kingdoms* revisions/re-creations, movies, drama series, comic books, animations, and computer games. *Three Kingdoms* is a textbook example of a “one-source multi-use” product with unlimited marketability. Also noteworthy are the dedicated fan sites for the work, which are mostly run by supporters of the work with near-professional expertise. Webmasters of *Three Kingdoms*-related websites also tend to demonstrate vast and specific knowledge concerning particular aspects of the work, such as knowledge on its historical background or details of *Three Kingdoms* computer games. Currently, there are hundreds of such websites available in Korean alone, some of which

---

state of Wu is included, and only one strategist from Wu made the list, demonstrating that readers interpret the work mostly as a conflict between two archenemies, Shu-Han and Wei. In this context, the title of the work is rather misleading to modern readers in that the third kingdom in the novel, the state of Wu, fails to make any substantial impression on readers, whether in terms of legitimacy or the prospect of reuniting China. The past three decades in Korea saw quite a few revisions of *Three Kingdoms* accompanied by positive renditions of Cao Cao and his state, yet not a single re-interpretation of the work has made the Sun family or the state of Wu the focus and it is unlikely that such a revision will emerge in the near future.

gain financial benefits by selling or trading so-called cultural contents

(*munhwak'ont'ench'ũ*) concerning *Three Kingdoms*.<sup>8</sup>

It should also be noted that numerous distinct kinds of re-creations of the work are being produced to satisfy consumers of the *Three Kingdoms* cultural entertainment industry so that each reader, player, or viewer can select the revision that suits his or her stage of preference best. Sometimes the emergence of distinct re-creations of the work leads the fans of *Three Kingdoms* into specific trends. By the same token, the erudition of the consumer urges the producers to create new versions of the work. In this context, “The reader is both the producer and the consumer of a text.”<sup>9</sup>

Such interactions, along with so-called “*Three Kingdoms* stress” (the frustration one feels at the prospect of being isolated and marginalized from mainstream society if one lacks an adequate level of knowledge of the classic) have broadened the readership of

---

<sup>8</sup> An example of these websites is ChǒngWǒn'giSamguk chi Yǒn'guso (Centre for *Three Kingdoms* Research by ChǒngWǒn'gi; <http://www.samgookji.com>). According to the announcement on the website, the centre is run by Chǒng, a Ph.D. candidate in Chinese literature who studies exclusively *Three Kingdoms*, and charges fees to subscribers for “expenses for maintenance and research of *Three Kingdoms*.” (Refer to <http://www.samgookji.com/institute/introlab.php>) As of February 2010, there are 18,349 subscribers and counting. This website is quite influential in that it has numerous ardent fans of *Three Kingdoms* who have agreed to pay fees to stay abreast of *Three Kingdoms*-related news and recent information, and that it introduces new *Three Kingdoms*-related cultural products to both ardent and potential fans of the work. It is worth noting that, according to the announcement, quite a few subscribers are novice readers who seek to acquaint themselves with *Three Kingdoms* for the first time. (Refer to <http://www.samgookji.com/institute/introlab.php>.)

<sup>9</sup>Jinhee Kim, “The Reception and the Place of *Three Kingdoms*” in *Three Kingdoms and Chinese Culture*, 149.

the work for the past several decades in Korea, making it a “national novel of Korea”-- according to Chang Chǒng’il, at least.<sup>10</sup>

However, we should bear in mind that this flood of revisions and re-creations often prevents readers from becoming acquainted with the original work. Although more than four hundred translations, revisions, and adaptations have emerged in Korea, an “untainted” and complete modern translation of the Mao-edition did not appear until the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> It remains the only complete translation of the original work mostly because this “obsolete” and rather boring masterpiece has never been popular among modern readers.<sup>12</sup> It is quite ironic that while Yi Mun’yŏl’s version of *Three Kingdoms* has sold seventeen million copies over the past two decades, in striking contrast, the number of Korean readers who are familiar with the original work is exceptionally small, even though it paved the way for the success of the modern re-creations. After all, it can be argued that, as a renowned Korean historical fiction writer recently asserted: “[When it

---

<sup>10</sup> Refer to Chang’s preface to his translation of *Three Kingdoms* in the previous chapter.

<sup>11</sup> Kim Kuyong’s translation (1974) is the first and the only complete modern translation of the Mao-edition *Three Kingdoms*. However, as Kim mentions in the preface, it is based on the *Hyŏnt’oSamgukchi* 懸吐三國志 published by Pangmunsŏgwan 博文書館 in 1935, which is a modified reprint of the Mao-edition that adds Korean particles to the sentences in classical Chinese to enhance readability for Koreans. *Hyŏnt’oSamgukchi*, the only *Three Kingdoms* edition that Kim used for his translation, also includes numerous typographical and editorial errors. Even now, Koreans do not have a complete translation of the novel “faithful to the original work” in terms of textual accuracy which is comparable to the English translation by Moss Roberts that came out in 1994. This “untainted” complete modern translation is called *chŏngyŏk* 正譯 or *chŏngbon* 正本, which literally means “orthodox” or “authentic” translation, implying that all other translations more or less lack legitimacy.

<sup>12</sup>Cho Sŏnggi, “Samgukchiūihan’gye: Chaemiŏmnūnwŏnbonkwachaemi’innūnpŏnyŏkpon (The limitations of *Three Kingdoms*: Boring original and interesting translations),” 22.

comes to historical fiction,] innocent knowledge [on the part of the readers] trumps no knowledge or indifference.”<sup>13</sup> Modern translators and producers of *Three Kingdoms*-related cultural works have revived one of the richest legacies in human history and have brought about the heyday of a work that first appeared some four hundred years ago. There is no doubt that *Three Kingdoms* will continue to thrive in the years to come; how it will evolve depends solely on those who continue to cherish this masterpiece, be they those re-creating it or those appreciating it.

---

<sup>13</sup>Cited from the interview with Yi Chŏngmyŏng in *The Hankyoreh Newspaper* on October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008. (News article available at [http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/specialsection/newspickup\\_section/319016.html](http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/specialsection/newspickup_section/319016.html)) Yi is currently the most famous Korean “faction” writer who in his recent work depicts a famous Chosŏn painter Sin Yunbok as a transvestite woman. In the interview, he acknowledges that he does not believe in actuality that Sin Yunbok was a woman, but that it was worth trying to draw attention from his readers.