

Book Notes

How Three Kingdoms Became a National Novel of Korea: From Sanguozhi yanyi to Samgukchi by Hyuk-chan Kwon. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2023. x, 243 pp.

This book offers a longue durée perspective on the “Koreanization” of the Chinese literary classic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. By chronicling the evolving presence of *Three Kingdoms* in Korea, Kwon expands the national boundaries of literary canons and reframes the novel as a shared East Asian cultural artifact. He attributes the novel’s early popularity in Korea to its being composed largely in literary Chinese rather than vernacular—unlike other great Chinese masterpieces—which made it more accessible to the classically trained literati of Joseon Korea. Other factors, however, also contributed to the novel’s acclaim over the course of its reception in Korea. From the Joseon period onward, *Three Kingdoms* captivated Korean readers and maintained a dominant presence in the literary market well into recent decades. In this way, it has become a perennial literary phenomenon, continually adapting to the evolving configurations of the Korean literary landscape.

Chapter 2 (the first substantive chapter after a brief introduction) surveys the literary climate of Joseon Korea, examining trends in the importation of Chinese fiction and the broader cultural attitudes toward literature. Kwon highlights the tensions surrounding the legitimacy of fiction, focusing in particular on Gi Daeseung’s (1527–1573) 1569 petition to King Seonjo (1552–1608), an avid reader of *Three Kingdoms*, which criticizes fiction for the shallow alternative to proper historical learning it offers in entertaining and therefore corrupting format. Despite these scornful attitudes towards fiction, which persist throughout the Joseon Dynasty and culminate in King Jeongjo’s

(1752–1800) campaigns against stylistic corruption (*munche banjeong*) caused by excessive reading of Chinese novels, actual literary tastes increasingly leaned toward the imaginative and the entertaining—a trend further discussed in subsequent chapters. Kwon also notes other influential Chinese works that circulated in Korea and were popular throughout East Asia, including *New Stories* by Qu You (1347–1433), *Supplementary New Stories* by Li Zhen (1376–1452), and the *Extensive Records from the Reign of Great Tranquility*, the latter known in Korea since the Goryeo period. He observes that the Chinese literary turn toward introspection and emotional exploration found no parallel in Korea, which instead saw a proliferation of war literature following the Imjin War and Manchu invasions. While it is true that *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Plum in the Golden Vase* were introduced late and never found a wide Korean audience, the author overlooks an important domestic development: the rise of the lineage novel (*gamun soseol*) in elite vernacular culture, which dealt extensively with emotional dilemmas produced by the patrilineal kinship structure.

Chapter 3 traces the dissemination of *Three Kingdoms* in Korea, beginning with its first recorded mention in Gi Daesung's 1569 petition—suggesting its importation predates this reference. Kwon emphasizes Joseon literati's particular admiration for Zhuge Liang and Liu Bei, figures seen to embody loyalty to the Han Dynasty. He catalogues major extant Korean editions of the novel, notably the Jeju edition (dated to either 1567 or 1627), which indicates the novel's popularity even on the periphery of the Korean peninsula. The novel also served educational purposes: it was read by elite women and male literati alike, the latter using it to improve their proficiency in literary Chinese. The chapter further explores the popularization of Guan Yu after the Imjin War. Beyond state-sponsored shrines dedicated to him, Guan Yu's heroic image was bolstered by his portrayal in *Three Kingdoms* and met a cultural need for national heroes in the war's aftermath. In Korean adaptations, Guan Yu was even depicted as interceding on behalf of Koreans during the Japanese invasions, becoming a localized, Korean hero.

Chapter 4 situates the novel within the ideological climate of the Ming-Qing transition and Korea's accompanying identity crisis. After abandoning plans for a northern expedition to restore the Ming, Korea reimagined itself as the last stronghold of Confucian civilization and commemorated the legacy of the Ming through the erection of the Altar of Great Gratitude (Daebodan) in honor of the Ming's life-saving military assistance during the Imjin War. *Three Kingdoms*, with its treatment of Shu-Han legitimacy, resonated with Korean loyalist sentiments. The novel aligned with prevailing historiographical frameworks,

inspired by Zhu Xi's *Outline and Digest*, that emphasized moral righteousness over territorial control as the criterion for political legitimacy. Kwon concludes the chapter by listing Korean works that revisit the issue of Shu-Han legitimacy.

Chapter 5 shifts focus to modern Korean translations of the novel, with attention to the lasting influence of the Japanese translation and adaptation by Yoshikawa Eiji (1892–1962), known primarily for his samurai novels. His version was serialized in *Keijō nippō* (a Japanese-language newspaper in colonial Korea), from 1939 to 1943. Before exploring modern editions, Kwon surveys the earlier woodblock, rental library, and *ttakjibon* editions circulating around the turn of the 20th century, which underscore the novel's enduring popularity across both the late Joseon and colonial eras. He examines three major colonial-period translations by Yang Geonsik (1889–1944), Pak Taewon (1909–1986), and Han Yong-un (1879–1944). *Three Kingdoms*, significantly, was a bestseller in the politically stifling environment of the colonial era, and it maintained this status for decades after.

The final chapter, chapter 6, examines contemporary, commercially motivated translations of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* by three major South Korean authors: Yi Mun-yol (Yi Munyeol, 1948–), Hwang Sok-yong (Hwang Seok-yeong, 1943–), and Jang Jung-il (Jang Jeong-il, 1962–). Each, already well-established in literary circles, approaches the text with an eye toward marketability and personal ideological imprint, positioning their versions in competitive opposition to one another. However, their limited command of literary Chinese results in frequent mistranslations. The chapter also considers the strategic marketing of these editions, which are promoted not only as literary works but also as tools for sharpening logical thinking—often advertised using testimonials from successful university entrance exam passers.

In sum, this book traces the evolving reception and transformation of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in Korea across centuries. It is a useful resource for scholars interested in book history, translation studies, and the transcultural migration of literary canons.

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