

Romance of the Three Kingdoms

Romance of the Three Kingdoms is one of the greatest Chinese classical novels. Written by novelist Luo Guanzhong (c. 1330 – c. 1400), it is one of the “Four Great Rare Works” together with *The Water Margin*, *Jin Ping Mei* and *Journey to the West*.

A popular saying goes, “A boy shouldn't read *Three Kingdoms*, a girl shouldn't watch *Western Chamber*.” The reason is that *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is known for its extensive coverage of deceitful schemes, and *Romance of the Western Chamber* describes the urge for girls to find companionship once they reach a certain age. Both were thought to bring bad influences for the young.

Romance of the Three Kingdoms has 120 chapters, altogether nearly 600,000 words; the latest television adaptation features 95 episodes. In our dance drama, Yang Yuntao and I could only select seven of the most exciting episodes: the Yellow Turban Rebellion and Three Heroes Swear Brotherhood in the Peach Garden; Lu Bu and Diao Chan's Secret Rendezvous Under the Moon; Cao Cao Discusses Heroes with Liu Bei in a Plum Garden; Guan Yu Escorts Liu Bei's Two Wives over a Thousand Miles; Zhao Yun Rescues Liu Bei's Son at Long Slope Battle; Zhuge Liang's Empty City Stratagem; and Zhou Yu Sets Fire to Cao Cao's Chained Warships at the Red Cliff. These events lead up to the Battle of the Red Cliff, and are set in a time before the stand-off between the Three Kingdoms; only Zhuge's story has been brought forward in time. In this hour and half long performance, we want to capture the characters' thoughts and feelings – from emotions within and critical situations to the dance and stage movements elicited – each stage decision hinges on the wish to sketch out their personality, not just simply recreating the history and telling the story.

Even though *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is a novel and not a historical chronicle; Luo created his masterpiece based on actual historical events and persons, where over two-third of the book depict real events, and the rest embellished with imagination. The official history by Chen Shou from the Western Jin dynasty, *Records of Three Kingdoms*, focussed mostly on Wei, with 30 chapters, and Shu was only discussed with 15 chapters. The Yellow Turban Rebellion, Dong Zhuo's tyranny, Battle of the Red Cliff did happen; as for the rise of heroes at the end of Han dynasty, characters like Dong Zhuo, Cao Cao, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhuge Liang all once blazed in history.

However, Luo held a different view from the official history. He supported Shu and opposed Wei. The prevailing sentiment was respect for Liu Bei and despise for Cao Cao. He believed that Liu Bei, descended from Han Emperor Jing, was the only one with a legitimate claim to the throne. Thus, he supported Shu Han. Cao Cao, who held the emperor hostage to control

warlords, and his son Cao Pi, were disloyal usurpers from Cao Wei. So, 104 chapters out of 120 told stories related to Shu Han. There were hardly any villains from Shu Han, whereas Cao Wei was populated by rogues. He also eulogised and deified figures from Shu Han: Liu Bei treated his people with kindness and magnanimity, Guan Yu loyal and righteous, Zhang Fei valorous and bold, Zhao Yun always victorious. Zhuge Liang occupied an especially lofty position; even the multi-talented general of the Shu-Wu allied army Zhou Yu is insignificant in the glory of Zhuge.

Luo's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is no more than two-third factual; our stage version made further concessions on this basis, where two-third came from our creative interpretation. The Chinese title came from the lyrics *Memories of the Past at the Red Cliff* by Song dynasty literati Su Shi:

The great river eastward flows, with its waves are gone all those
gallant heroes of bygone years.
West of the ancient fortress appears the Red Cliff.
Here General Zhou won his early fame.

The dance drama focuses on bringing out emotions, for example, Lady Mi, knowing her injuries would slow her companions' escape, entrusted her only child to Zhao Yun at the Battle of Long Slope. Zhao reluctantly agreed and helped Lady Mi to her end to avoid an even more cruel fate if captured. The majesty of grief dominates the episode. To accompany Zhuge's Empty City Stratagem, we chose *Wine Frolic*, the classic *guqin* tune from around Wei and Jin dynasty, to convey Kongming's clearheadedness and calm composure in the face of danger, in hope that the audience will savour the steady build up of rhythm. The alliance of music and dance forms the soul of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and the key for audiences to enter the world of Three Kingdoms on stage.

The Rise and Decline of the Three Kingdoms

At the end of the Han dynasty, warlords carved up the once superpower into small states. The allied forces of Sun Quan and Liu Bei defeated Cao Cao's army at the Battle of Red Cliff which marked a balancing consequence of military power among the three. This period is called the Three Kingdoms and lasted 46 years (220–265). It roughly begins with the foundation of Wei when Cao Pi ousted the last emperor of the Han dynasty, progressed through to the ascent of the Jin dynasty defeating the three kingdoms, Wei, Shu and Wu.

- Wei** Cao Pi, son of Cao Cao, deposed the last emperor of the Han dynasty and set up capital at Luoyang. Wei's geographical coverage included modern-day provinces Hebei, Henan, Shandong, Shanxi, Gansu and central Shaanxi, Hubei, Jiangsu, northern Anhui, central and western Liaoning, northern Korea. It was overthrown by Jin dynasty. Wei had five emperors and lasted 46 years (220–265).
- Shu** Liu Bei claimed the throne as a descendant of the Han imperial family and founded Shu, also known as Shu Han in history. Shu's geographical coverage included modern-day provinces Sichuan, Yunnan, northern Guizhou and Shaanxi, as well as the Hanzhong area. The dynasty lasted for 43 years (221–263) under two emperors, and was destroyed by Wei.
- Wu** Sun Quan took over Jiangnan and declared himself emperor. Wu's geographical coverage included modern-day Chinese provinces Zhejiang, Hunan, Hubei, Fujian, Guangdong, as well as Vietnam. The dynasty was defeated by Jin after four emperors lasting 59 years (222–280).

The Movers and Shakers

Liu Bei (Liu Yinghong)

Liu Bei (courtesy name Xuande) was born in Zhuo County. He was the son of Liu Sheng and grandson of the Han Emperor Jin. He however grew up in poverty and sold straw shoes for a living. Later he met Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, and they swore brotherhood. Together, they led successful campaigns in suppressing the Yellow Turban Rebellion after which Liu became Prefect of Anxi. He has sought safety and opportunities with Gongsun Zan, Cao Cao, Yuan Shao, Liu Biao and others. In the year 207, the 12th year of Jian'an, he visited Zhuge Liang three times to entreat Zhuge to become his strategist. He conquered Jingzhou, Yizhou and the Hanzhong area and declared himself Shu Han Emperor Zhaolie in 221. His last campaign was an unsuccessful invasion of Wu; he died from illness on campaign at Baidicheng after losing a battle.

Guan Yu (Chen Haijing)

Guan Yu (courtesy name Yunchang) came from Jieliang in the Hedong area. He fled his hometown after killing a local oppressor. He wandered around the country and swore brotherhood with Liu Bei and Zhang Fei. He followed Liu with unwavering devotion, and together planned to restore the Han rulership. They were separated after the battle at Xuzhou, and Guan temporarily stayed

at Cao Cao's camp, but refused their offer of riches and fortune. He eventually found out Liu's whereabouts, and immediately escorted Liu's wives through perils to seek his sworn brother, leaving behind wealth and power. Guan was renowned for his loyalty and sense of righteousness, but he was against the military alliance of Shu and Wu. He ended up being captured by a Wu general after losing Jingzhou to the armies of Sun Quan and Cao Cao, and died under Sun's hands.

Zhang Fei (Mi Tao)

Zhang Fei (courtesy name Yide) was born in Zhuo County. Having sworn brotherhood with Liu Bei and Guan Yu, he devoted all his possessions to help Liu. Zhang was fearless on the battlefield. At the battle of Long Slope Bridge against Cao Cao's regiments, his resounding war cry frightened the Cao army into retreat. Loyalty mattered most to Zhang, when he heard that there was a conspiracy against Liu, he broke into the post station and lashed at the superintendent. He cried daily for the death of Guan and swore to revenge. His hot-bloodedness costed him his life, as he was killed by one of his defected generals. Zhang is the embodiment of impetuous bravery.

Zhuge Liang (Xu Qiang)

Zhuge Liang (courtesy name Kongming, pseudonym Wolong Xiansheng) lived a secluded life in Longzhong, Nanyang until three visits from Liu Bei persuaded him to join Liu's army as strategist and to help restore the Han empire. Zhuge suggested to base their operations in Jingzhou and seek alliance with Wu to fight against Cao Cao as a way to re-distribute power. He travelled to Dong Wu to persuade Sun Quan and collaborated with Zhou Yu; together they defeated Cao's army at the Battle of Red Cliff. Winning Nanjun, Jingzhou, Xiangyang and building up a stronghold for the Shu army. Liu Bei declared himself emperor and Zhuge became his chancellor. After Liu's death, he continued to devote all his energies to help Liu's son Shan and died of illness in the camp.

Zhao Yun (Chen Jun)

Zhao Yun (courtesy name Zilong) came from Zhending, Changshan. He was originally a general of Gongsun Zan, but later defected to Liu Bei. Zhao is known for his loyalty and bravery on the battlefield. In the Battle of Long Slope Bridge, he broke through the ranks of Cao's army on his own to rescue Liu Bei's son Liu Shan and killed 50 key officers from Cao's camp. His reputation

as the embodiment of bravery spread far. Even when he was 70, he managed to kill 5 generals in Hanzhong. Zhao was a model general who was both wise and brave.

Diaochan (Xie Yin)

Dong Zhuo forced the seven-year-old Han emperor Xian to declare him chancellor. He was cruel and no one dared to oppose him for fear of their lives. Wang Yun invited Dong's personal bodyguard Lu Bu to his house as guest, and pretended to give his adopted daughter Diaochan to Lu as wife. At the same time, Wang was promising Dong that he could take Diaochan as concubine. One day, Lu and Diaochan met at Dong's garden; Diaochan tricked Lu into believing she was forced to become Dong's concubine. Dong caught the pair together, but Diaochan, crying, made up a story about being taken advantage by Lu. She succeeded in turning Lu and Dong against each other, and Lu assassinated Dong short after.

Cao Cao (Yuan Shengjun)

Cao Cao (courtesy name Mengde) was born in the Qiao County. Cao grew up in court, which cultivated an extreme shrewdness and adaptability in him. He could have been a capable official in peace but was instead a villain in war. Cao failed to assassinate Dong Zhuo who took power from the Han Emperor Xian, and ran away to Chenliu to raise an army. In the end, Dong was killed by Wang Yun and Lu Bu, and Cao escorted Emperor Xian to Xuchang where he hold the emperor hostage to control the warlords. He wiped out Yuan Shao at the Battle of Guandu and secured the north under his rule. He led multiple campaigns against Shu Han and Dong Wu. At the Battle of Red Cliff, he suffered a crippling defeat from the allied forces of Sun Quan and Liu Bei, and never regained enough power to campaign south again. In year 216, Cao styled himself the Lord of Wei. He died from an illness four years later in Luoyang, and his son Cao Pi usurped Emperor Xian and founded the Wei empire.

Zhou Yu (Mi Tiao)

Zhou Yu (courtesy name Gongjin) was one of Sun Quan's most capable generals. Young, dashing and elegant, he was an expert in politics, warfare and music. As the admiral of Dong Wu, he planned the Battle of Red Cliff with Zhuge Liang. He saw the Cao army's weakness lie in their unfamiliarity with naval tactics, and they have been campaigning for a long time and were far

from their terrain. He managed to defeat Cao's large army with a small troop by setting fire to the whole chained fleet. However, Zhou always wanted to be the best and was jealous of Zhuge Liang. He was 34 at the Battle of Red Cliff and Zhuge was only 27.

Gerard CC Tsang

Script and Research Director

Romance of the Three Kingdoms