

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast 100th episode extravaganza.

Yes, I know, we're only at episode 92 in the narrative, but counting the seven supplemental episodes I've done, this IS the 100th episode since we began our podcast journey through the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. I know I've said this before, but thank you all for your support of this podcast. Knowing that more and more people are checking out the show and discovering the novel through it is a huge part of what keeps me doing this. I love all the comments you've sent, so keep them coming.

With the podcast celebrating its 100th episode, I figured that's as good an excuse as any to pause the narrative for a day and mark the occasion with a question-and-answer session. A number of you have sent in questions, to which I have some long-winded answers, as the length of this episode suggests. So let's get to it.

Listener Kyle asked, and I'm paraphrasing a bit here: What happens after the Three Kingdoms period?

To answer this question without giving away too many spoilers for those of you who don't know how the novel ends, I'm going to refrain from talking about how the Three Kingdoms period ended or who ultimately came out on top, and just focus on what happened afterward.

Actually, the novel kind of gives away the ending anyway with its first line: Ever since antiquity, domains under heaven, after a long period of division, tend to unite. The Three Kingdoms period officially ended in the year 280, almost 100 years after when the novel began, and the empire was reconsolidated under the rule of the Jin (4) Dynasty. However, the Jin was not one of the more long-lasting dynasties in Chinese history. It had problems from the beginning. The government was corrupt, and its ranks were filled with officials who received their positions because they were close with the ruling family rather than anything having to do with talent, skills, or character.

The trouble ran all the way to the top of the regime. The founding emperor of the Jin Dynasty more or less just inherited his enterprise, so he wasn't someone who had to fight for everything he got, like a Cao Cao or Liu Bei. He listened to sycophants and was way too fond of women. In fact, he actually banned everyone in the empire from getting married for a whole year so that he could have his pick of all the pretty young girls in the realm for his palace. When things were this bad at the top, you can imagine how that trickled down through the ranks. Truly, the entire governing apparatus was just rotting from the inside out.

Things got worse when this founding emperor died. He only had one living son, so he named that son as the heir apparent. However, this son had a developmental disability and really was not up to the task of governing. The founding emperor placed him in the hands of a trusted regent, but as soon as the founding emperor breathed his last in the year 290 -- 10 years after the empire was reunited -- things started to hit the fan.

The new emperor, the one with the developmental disability, became a mere puppet, and his 17-year reign was marked by one power struggle after another between various factions vying to play the puppeteer. One of those factions was his wife, who lived up to every wicked female trope in Chinese history and literature as she viciously schemed to gain power and meddle in court politics. A year into the new emperor's reign, the regent his father had appointed had been ousted and killed by the empress.

But that just marked the start of the unrest. For the next 15 years, the empire would be plagued by one violent internal struggle after another as various members of the royal family rose up in rebellion to overthrow their rivals and gain control of the puppet emperor. This period was called the Disorder of the Eight Princes. Don't let that name fool you though. There were way more than eight princes of the royal family involved; it's just that there were eight main guys. Also, this wasn't one giant war where all the princes went at each other at the same time, and it wasn't one continuous

conflict that lasted 15 years. Instead it was periods of clashes interspersed with brief respites of uneasy peace.

The Disorder of the Eight Princes did not kill the empire, but it greatly weakened it, and that led to the thing that DID kill the empire -- uprisings by groups of various ethnic minorities. Beginning in the late Eastern Han Dynasty, nomadic tribes from the north had been gradually migrating south into the lands around the Yellow River. During the chaos of the Jin Dynasty's internal power struggles, many of the royal princes enlisted these nomadic tribes into their own military.

When the cracks began to show in the Jin, the nomadic tribes saw an opening to declare their independence and grab a chunk of the empire for themselves. The first two such instances came in the year 304. The Jin court was pretty ineffective in its attempts to put down these uprisings. In 311, one of these rogue kingdoms captured the Jin capital city of Luoyang (4,2), along with the emperor. The Jin didn't officially die there, as many of the court officials fled the capital, and they elevated another emperor. Five years later, though, this new emperor was captured, ending the Jin Dynasty.

Or at least, the Western Jin Dynasty. Yup. The time period we've covered up to this point is referred to as the Western Jin, which implies that there was an Eastern Jin somewhere. So that part of the dynasty began in 317, a year after the Western Jin ended. This continuation of the house of Jin was led by a member of the royal clan who, a decade earlier, had seen which way the wind was blowing and decided to go off to the southern city of Jiankang (4,1), or present-day Nanjing (2,1), to build up his enterprise under the official pretext of trying to pacify the region. He won over the local elites, and when word came in 316 that, oops, the House of Jin was no more, this guy said, wait a minute, I'm from the House of Jin, and I'm still here, so the house lives, just farther south and farther east. And so began the Eastern Jin Dynasty.

The Eastern Jin, however, had limited a limited sphere of influence, and it took this new dynasty a while to consolidate its control of the southern half of the empire. Meanwhile, the northwestern half

of the empire, which was now in the hands of the former nomadic tribes, fractured as a series of 16 kingdoms rose and fell between the years 304 and 439. Yes, SIXTEEN kingdoms, in the span of 135 years. And you thought THREE kingdoms was a lot to deal with. All this instability and warfare made life in the North pretty hellish, triggering several mass population migrations as civilians fled to the relative stability and calm of the south, to the Eastern Jin.

The Eastern Jin did ok for about a century, but it ran into trouble in the early 400s, and in the year 420, a former court official of the Eastern Jin usurped the throne and founded what is now referred to as the Liu (2) Song (4) Dynasty. Twenty years later, the northern half of the empire was also consolidated into one entity, known as the Northern Wei (4) Dynasty. So beginning in the year 440, we officially switch from the era of the 16 Kingdoms and the Eastern Jin to the era of the Northern and Southern Dynasties.

During this new era, instead of the empire fracturing into a bazillion little kingdoms, we instead have, for the most part, two major kingdoms, one in the north and one in the south, hence the name for the period. What continued to change, however, were the names of the kingdoms and the people in charge of them. Both the north and the south went through several regime changes until in the year 589, the northern kingdom of Sui (4) managed to once again unite the empire.

But the Sui Dynasty was also short-lived, as it lasted less than 30 years, being succeeded by the Tang Dynasty. Now the Tang Dynasty managed to stick around for almost 300 years, so I think this is a good place for us to stop.

So, to recap: The unity that followed the Three Kingdoms period only really lasted for about a decade, making it more of a brief pitstop on the way to more disunity. In fact, some historians lump the 369 years between 220 and 589 into one giant era of disunity. Just think about that for a second: 369 years during which China was rarely united. To put this into context: The United States has been a

country for all of 240 years, and during that time, it's had only one true period of disunity, and that civil war lasted just five years.

When I think about this nearly four-century-long period of disunity, a couple things strike me. One, if you were living toward the tail end of that period, could you even fathom China as one single entity? I mean, not only would you have not known a unified China in your lifetime, but there would have been no unified China in the lifetimes of your parents, grandparents, great grandparents, great great grandparents, and so forth, going back generations. Second, the periods of division that followed the Three Kingdoms were actually much longer than the Three Kingdoms era. The novel covers almost 100 years, but that's followed by nearly 300 more years of unrest. It's kind of interesting, then, that it's the Three Kingdoms period, and not the three centuries that followed it, that has so captured the imagination of the Chinese people. I think that is a testament to the staying power of the people and events of the Three Kingdoms era.

Whew! So I just spent a third of an episode answering one question. I've got to pick up the pace here. Next, Phil asks:

Could you please prepare more supplemental episodes to explore the historical Three Kingdoms period vs the romantic novel?

Why yes, indeed, Phil. I do plan to do more fact-and-fiction supplemental episodes. I'll do those as the novel progresses and more characters exit stage left. When we reach the end of the novel, my hope is to do some sort of look back and wrap-up, and as part of that, I would likely delve more into the major differences between the novel and the actual historical period. So stay tuned.

Next, listener Josh asks a fun question. Three fun questions, actually: First, if you could serve one character from the novel, who would it be? Second, is there any character from the novel that

you would go back and save, or you would like to see how things would have played out differently if they had lived? And third, what character would you slay, or barring that, throw into prison or exile?

So, the first part of that: Which character would I want to serve. If we are talking about the big three: Liu Bei, Cao Cao, and Sun Quan, I'd say Sun Quan, and it'd actually be a fairly easy call. Working for Cao Cao is just not the safest career path, since the guy shows no compunction about lopping off innocent heads when it suits him. I mean, look at the poor granary officer from episode 23. Cao Cao tells you to cut the soldier's daily portions because provisions are running low. You tell Cao Cao that the men would be up in arms about this, and Cao Cao says do it anyway and I'll take care of any repercussions. So you do it, and the men are, just as you predicted, up in arms. So how does Cao Cao take care of it? He scapegoats you and cuts off your head to appease the men. Talk about being thrown under the horse cart. Or how about the official in episode 59 who dared to criticize Cao Cao's poetry and ended up with a spear through the chest? Or how about episode 89, where, after a failed coup, Cao Cao asked the court officials who among them had gone out during the chaos to help put out the fire that was engulfing the city, and then he executed all those who raised their hands, on the charge that they were actually trying to help the conspirators instead of putting out the fire. I don't know about you, but I just can't work under those conditions.

As for Liu Bei, it's true that he seems to treat his men very well, but I think eventually I would just grow disillusioned if I worked for him because of the blatant hypocrisy I'd have to overlook. The guy puts himself forward as a man of honor and virtue, but he does have a habit of turning against those who give him refuge. He tried to assassinate Cao Cao while in his service. He ditched Yuan Shao after using him for shelter from Cao Cao for a while. He was taken in by Liu Biao, and then ended up taking over his territory. He got help from Sun Quan to fend off Cao Cao, and quickly turned around and stole a few cities from him. And of course, he was invited into the Riverlands by Liu Zhang, and we all

know how that turned out. At every turn, Liu Bei was always portrayed as an honorable man unwilling to do what others kept telling him he should do, and yet in the end, every time, what he supposedly did not want to do ended up getting done. Funny how that happens.

So that leaves me with Sun Quan, and he seems like a pretty stable guy, without the hypocrisy of Liu Bei and sans the unpredictability of Cao Cao. He is, by all accounts, a wise ruler, a good user of talent, and a lord who truly values his men, as evident in the way he honored the general Zhou Tai after Zhou Tai saved his butt in episode 87. Besides, the Southlands are beautiful, prosperous, a lot warmer than the Heartlands, and not as hot as the Riverlands.

Now if we're talking about anyone beyond the big three, then I would, without a second thought, go work for Liu Bei's general Zhao Yun. Not coincidentally, he is also the answer to the question of who my favorite character is, which several listeners have asked. The guy is a smart, courageous, and all-around kickass warrior, capable of turning back entire armies by himself, so I can just hang back and watch him take care of business while I cheer him on. And when things go bad, I know that he's the type to get my back. He's also shown himself to be a kind man who looks out for his soldiers and the civilians, a man that I'd be proud to call my boss.

And what about Zhuge Liang? As much as I like the idea of working for a guy who seemingly always wins, I think his management style would drive me nuts after a while. The guy just likes to play everything so close to the vest. He never fully explains any of his orders to you, even if they sound completely nuts. And when he gives you a tip, he puts it in a silk pouch and tells you you can't open it until this and this date. I just can't work with that sort of uncertainty. I like to have all the cards on the table.

Now, as for whom I'd want to save, I think the obvious answer would be Master Young Phoenix, Pang Tong, who was killed in an ambush during Liu Bei's conquest of the Riverlands. It's very intriguing to imagine the juggernaut Liu Bei might have assembled with the combined wisdom of Pang Tong and Zhuge Liang.

I guess if I have to save another character, maybe I'll save Zhou Yu to see what Dongwu could do if its almost-as-brilliant-as-Zhugeliang commander had lived another 20 or 30 years. But then again, the way things were going for Zhou Yu every time he matched wits with Zhuge Liang, I might just be subjecting him to three more decades of aggravation and coughing up blood.

As for the last question, whom I'd want to slay or banish, there are some characters from the beginning of the novel that I definitely would not mind doing away with, like the 10 eunuchs who were messing things up, or He (2) Jin (4), the idiot regent who feuded with the eunuchs and eventually was killed by them. But before he died, he did the horrible thing of calling the warlord Dong (3) Zhuo (2) to court, and that gave Dong Zhuo the opening he needed to take over power and really make a mess of things for everyone, from the highest officials to the lowliest commoners, for no good reason aside from his casual cruel streak.

Another group of people I could do without: Basically every person not named Liu Bei who conspired to assassinate Cao Cao. These guys were just so inept that they either blabbed too much to too many people about their plot, which led to their being exposed, or they concocted such hair-brained schemes that they set themselves up to fail miserably. Either way, every time one of these groups failed, not only did they get themselves and their families killed, but they also gave Cao Cao another excuse to purge more opponents at court and further tighten his grasp on power. So, way to go guys.

The next question is a combination of several questions from multiple listeners who asked, essentially, about the significance of the Three Kingdoms story in Chinese culture, how this historical era is taught in schools, and how the people and events in the story are generally viewed by the Chinese.

First, let's tackle the part about how the Three Kingdoms period is taught in schools. I only attended first through fifth grade in China back in the 1980s before I moved to the United States, and history was not a part of the curriculum up through that point, so I don't have first-hand experience on how the Three Kingdoms were taught. So to answer this question, I tracked down history textbooks currently used in Chinese schools to see how they present this period.

It looks like history class enters the curriculum in seventh grade, and in that textbook, the period is discussed mostly through a framework built around two major battles -- the Battle of Guandu (1,4), where Cao Cao defeated Yuan Shao to become master of the North, and the Battle of Red Cliff, which turned the tide of history and set us on the path to three kingdoms rather than one reunified empire ruled by Cao Cao. However, this period is given all of four pages in the textbook, so not really a lot of discussion there.

The only other instance of the Three Kingdoms that I found in the textbooks was a discussion of the novel in the textbook for a 12th-grade course on ancient Chinese literature. It gave a brief introduction to the novel, followed by an excerpt from the part where Cao Cao tried to assassinate Dong Zhuo, then fled, and then ended up mistakenly killing the relative who took him in.

Now, of course, your typical Chinese person would have already had significant exposure to the Three Kingdoms by the time they reach 12th grade. Personally, I read the novel well before I turned 10, and it's so omnipresent in Chinese culture. As I said at the beginning of this podcast two-plus years

ago, the novel and the era have been infused into many aspects of the culture. Just as lines from Shakespeare have come to represent certain ideas in Western culture, so too have stories from the Three Kingdoms become stand-ins for certain ideas in Chinese society.

For instance, all you have to do is mention the words “oath in the peach orchard,” and it would invoke in every Chinese person thoughts of brotherly affection, alluding to the pledge that Liu Bei and his brothers swore at the beginning of the novel. Want more examples? There’s an old saying in traditional Chinese society that men should strive to model themselves after Guan Yu, whose name has become synonymous with loyalty. Liu Bei’s three visits to Zhuge Liang’s thatched hut is legendary and frequently invoked as an idiom for the importance of persistence. Literally, if you want to tell someone to stick with something despite disappointments, just utter “three visits to the thatched hut.” The battle at Red Cliff is the Chinese version of David vs. Goliath. And the line Zhuge Liang used to taunt Zhou Yu after foiling the latter’s scheme to use Sun Quan’s sister to seduce Liu Bei -- that he gave away the lady and lost troops to boot -- is often used when describing an idea that backfired. And those are just a few of the many, many cultural references that came from this era and the novel.

Now, let’s talk about the way the events and people of this time period have been interpreted and reinterpreted over the centuries. Exhibit A of this phenomenon is the character of Cao Cao. In the era directly following the Three Kingdoms, Cao Cao, rather than Liu Bei, was actually considered the rightful successor to the Han Dynasty, and thus he was seen as a hero rather than a villain. So how did he go from that to being the most famous, or infamous, villain in Chinese history and literature?

The reason was the ever-present desire by subsequent dynasties to portray themselves as the “legitimate” ruling house, the house that inherited the mandate of heaven. This mandate-of-heaven idea goes something like this: A particular house, through great and virtuous deeds, receives the favor of heaven to rule the empire, and maintains that mandate as long as it continues on the right path.

But when it veers off that path, heaven withdraws its mandate and gives it to another, more deserving house.

Now, the Han Dynasty reigned for 400 years, so no one could dispute that it had the mandate of the heaven. The question, and the one on which Cao Cao's legacy turned, is who was the rightful heir to that mandate after the House of Han lost it.

During the Jin Dynasty, the one that immediately followed the Three Kingdoms period, the official line was that the mandate passed from the Han to the Wei, the kingdom founded by Cao Cao's descendants, and then through the Wei, the mandate passed to the Jin. That interpretation, of course, allowed the Jin to claim some extra degree of legitimacy by drawing a straight line between it and the Han Dynasty.

But, as we discussed at the beginning of this episode, the Jin Dynasty did not last very long, and its quick collapse brought about a few more centuries of disunity. During those centuries, the northern part of China was ruled by nomadic tribes that the people of China proper considered barbarians. These barbarians were not very nice to the Han people, the dominant ethnicity in what is considered China proper, all the way to the present day. So when the Han Chinese of later eras looked back on this period of disunity, they saw it as a dark age. So they often viewed the Wei and the Jin Dynasties not as legitimate successors to the Han Dynasty, but as usurpers and interlopers who brought on the dark age. And that is why Cao Cao became the villain, while Liu Bei, who claimed to be a descendant of the House of Han, became the hero.

This is also a good place to address another question, which comes from listener Andrew, who asks about the author of the novel, Luo Guanzhong. Andrew wants to know, who was this guy and how did his life affect his writing.

That is a great question, and the answer is very relevant to the discussion of how certain people are portrayed in the novel. Luo Guanzhong lived at the end of the Yuan (2) Dynasty, which was the dynasty founded by the Mongol descendants of Genghis Khan. They ruled China for about 100 years, but the Han Chinese never liked them, and eventually expelled them and founded a new dynasty, the Ming (2). Luo Guanzhong lived through the upheaval that was the transition from the Yuan to the Ming, and as we will see, this experience likely had a big effect on the novel he wrote.

During the time that Luo Guanzhong lived, there were a number of factions that rose up in opposition to the Yuan, but they weren't exactly buddies with each other. Luo Guanzhong, it is said, had the ambition to seek out a king. That meant he wanted to find and serve an enlightened lord who would expel the Yuan and return the empire to the Han. In pursuit of that goal, he went to serve one of the major players of the time. Unfortunately, this guy did not listen to Luo Guanzhong very much. For instance, when this guy wanted to declare himself emperor, the Yuan Dynasty was far from defeated and his other rivals for power were not yet vanquished. Luo Guanzhong and many other advisers told him it was too soon, but he ignored them all and did it anyway. Eventually, Luo Guanzhong became disillusioned and left.

Unsurprisingly, this guy did not turn out to be the enlightened lord that Luo Guanzhong wanted to serve, nor did he succeed in his quest for control of the empire. Things blew up in his face soon and he had to surrender to the Yuan. Then, after the Yuan fell, he ended up a prisoner of one of his former rivals, and that rival turned out to be the founder of the next dynasty, the Ming. By the way, the Ming Dynasty founder's last name was Zhu, just like mine. So I think I can claim to be the descendant of an imperial house in the same way that Liu Bei claims to be a descendant of imperial blood.

As for Luo Guanzhong, he now found himself *persona non grata* in the new political arena. The fact that he had served the enemy of the new ruler of China meant he was never going to be able to land any kind of position in the new government, which pretty much put an end to the whole

“ambition to seek a king” thing. And by this point, Luo Guanzhong was an old man anyway, so all he could do was focus on his novels.

So, how does this life experience affect the way the novel was written? Well, first of all, Luo Guanzhong had plenty of first-hand experience of the chaos and calamity that befell the general population during a changeover from one dynasty to the next, which comes through in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Also, he was a Han Chinese at a time when the Han Chinese were trying to expel hated barbarian overlords. Like I mentioned a little earlier, the prolonged disunity that followed the Three Kingdoms period was seen as dark age in which barbarians were the scourge of the Han Chinese. You can imagine how Luo Guanzhong’s personal experience might lead him to view that period as a dark age and thus see the Wei and Jin dynasties as interlopers who brought on the dark age, which in turn cast Cao Cao, the man who laid the foundation for the Wei Dynasty, in the role of the villain.

Also, Luo Guanzhong’s personal ambition to find and serve a wise lord is a recurring theme in the novel, which has many, many examples of talented men seeking a wise and deserving master. The most talented of them all, Zhuge Liang, would rather while away his prime in seclusion while waiting to meet a worthy master than to serve a lesser lord, but once he found that man, he gave everything he had to Liu Bei’s cause. We also see cases where a number of talented men met their downfall because they picked the wrong master, whether it was the inept Yuan Shao or the diabolical Cao Cao. So yeah, I think Luo Guanzhong was definitely projecting some of his personal experiences onto these characters. Think about it: Zhuge Liang, more than Liu Bei, is the pivotal character in the novel. So the hero is not even so much the wise lord, but the talented adviser who found a worthy master, a master who only succeeded when he met this talented man.

Ok, to wrap up the topic of how the people in the novel have been shaped and reshaped over the centuries, I'll share one more interesting perspective. It comes from the foreword in the 1973 Chinese publication of the novel, which is the printed copy I have. This foreword includes a lengthy critique of the novel. Now, in 1973, China was still in the throes of the Great Cultural Revolution, which was anything but great for China and its people. If you don't know much about it, google it. It was a destructive time when communist revolutionary zeal wrecked countless lives and set China back a decade or more.

The critique of the novel in the foreword captures the zeitgeist of the era. It examines the book through the lens of Maoism and the ideology of class struggle that ruled the day. While it praised the novel for its storytelling and artistic merits, the critique also denounced it as being on the wrong side of class struggle. Main characters like Liu Bei, Cao Cao, and Sun Quan are painted as members of the "landlord class" whose hands were stained by the blood of the peasants they oppressed. The Yellow Turban Rebellion is portrayed as a righteous attempt at revolution by the peasants, and it ended up being brutally suppressed by a corrupt feudal government and power-hungry warlords. The novel's concepts of loyalty, virtue, honor, and righteousness were all cast as outdated, feudalistic ideas designed to prop up the upper classes who oppressed the peasants. If I ever have the time, I'm tempted to translate this critique into English, because I think it's a terrific illustration of how drastically interpretation of history and art can vary with contemporary values.

So one lesson to take away from all this is that anyone who says history is written by the victors isn't looking far enough into the future. As Cao Cao, one of the winners of the Three Kingdoms era, can attest, history is actually written by the victors who overthrow the descendants of the previous victors.

Whew! So, moving on. A question from listener Ben:

Could you talk a little bit about cultural practices in the book that seem foreign to modern Chinese, such as beating on the chest and wailing? Or did the fictional story, which was written much later than the Three Kingdoms time period, insert a lot of 16th century practices when they were telling the story?

So, I hate to disappoint, but I can't really speak to which practices in the novel were authentic to the time period and which were more reflective of the time when the novel was written. I tried to do some research into this, but didn't have a whole lot of success. There is a Chinese book that is titled, promisingly enough, "Cultural Practices of the Three Kingdoms." Unfortunately, I can't find a copy of it in any library in the United States or online, so that's not very helpful.

However, the good news is that my research into cultural practices did reveal a number of interesting tidbits, and it gave me the idea to do some supplemental episodes in the future about various aspects of the culture of this era to help flesh out our picture of what life in this time was like. I hope to cover things like what kind of food people ate, the holidays they celebrated, the bedroom furnitures they had, the way they traveled, and so forth. So stay tuned for those. They should be fun.

The next question comes from Curt, who noted how eagerly Liu Zhang's people surrendered to Liu Bei during the battle for control of the Riverlands. Curt wonders whether the novel's embellishment of this story was some really outlandish pro-Liu Bei propaganda, or was Liu Zhang just that bad of a leader that everyone was just waiting for the chance to jump ship to Liu Bei.

So, let me start by saying that no Chinese dynasty or kingdom has ever ended on the watch of a solid or even just run-of-the-mill ruler. That is to say that the last ruler of a dynasty or kingdom is inevitably portrayed in extremes, either as a brutal tyrant whose cruelty drives the people to rise up, or as a muddle-headed weakling who practically begs someone to take his empire from him. So yes, I

have no doubt that some of the descriptions of Liu Zhang in the novel are exaggerated along these lines.

According to Chen (2) Shou (4), the author of the Records of the Three Kingdoms, the historical text upon which the novel is based, Liu Zhang presided over a period of relative peace in the region of Shu, which was to his credit. But Chen Shou also said that Liu Bei did right in seizing the Riverlands from Liu Zhang. Of course, there's a big caveat here. Chen Shou once served in Shu under the regime that Liu Bei founded, so he was likely just a little bit biased in favor of Liu Bei.

As for the rapidity with which Liu Zhang's officials seemed to turn on him, I think there are a couple things we should look at here. First, while Liu Bei's conquest of the Riverlands seemed to happen fairly quickly in the novel, it did take three years, so it wasn't like Liu Bei just marched in and everyone opened the door for him. Also, a factor that I think might've been at play here was that Liu Zhang, like his father, was not really a native of the Riverlands. His father hailed from the Heartlands and it was only in the 180s AD, around the time that the novel started, that he went into the Riverlands and took control. As such, he, and Liu Zhang after him, had to contend with the powerful local families that dominated regional politics. So I'd say that when Liu Bei began his takeover bid, at least some of these local families were thinking more about self-preservation and probably were not too picky about which outsider they called master, as long as they would be left alone. So there was a conflict between the interests of the guy at the top and the people in his service. Ironically, we will see this dynamic at play again once Zhuge Liang begins his efforts to invade the North.

Next, Matheus asks: As you likely know, many of the listeners of the podcast, or just overall fans of the Three Kingdom saga, were brought to it by the "Dynasty Warriors" series. What is your opinion on the game's Story Mode?

Matheus is definitely correct that it seems like many of you listeners out there first discovered the Three Kingdoms through the long-lived video game franchise. Unfortunately I have actually never played any of the games in the franchise, so I've got nothing to offer on that front. I will say, though, that doing this podcast and discovering how many enthusiastic fans of the video game franchise there are has made me more interested in trying out the newest Three Kingdoms game, as soon as its price drops a bit, because I'm well past the point in my life where I'd pay more than \$25 for any video game.

Next, we have a couple questions related to the single combat that dominates the description of battles in the novel.

First, I have often talked about how so-and-so fought for 100 bouts against so-and-so. More than a few listeners have asked what a bout is. Quite simply, a bout is an exchange of blows, where each combatant delivers an attack, whether it's a hack with a saber or a thrust with a spear, and parries a counterattack from his opponent.

Listener Dan also asks, what exactly is the deal with all the single combat in the novel, since realistically, they shouldn't have much of an impact on the outcomes of battles between massive armies?

And Dan would be absolutely right. From what I could find on the subject, it seems that this idea of single combat between commanders and top generals on opposing sides was pretty much a literary embellishment, one that, I should add, is a very common device in Chinese literature. I guess it just makes it easier to make heroes out of the characters. That's not to say one-on-one combat between generals never happened. For instance, it is historically true that Guan Yu killed Yuan Shao's general Yan Liang. But it probably didn't happen anywhere near as often as depicted in the novel.

Dan also asked another question: The 2010 TV series portrayed significant internal conflicts in Dong Wu between Zhou Yu and Sun Quan. Is this supported either historically or in the novel?

So, this is one of those things about the 2010 TV series that I did not like. The internal conflict between Zhou Yu and Sun Quan as portrayed on the show was never in the novel, and there's no mention of anything like it in the historical records. Quite the opposite, all indications were that Sun Quan respected Zhou Yu and treated him like an older brother, and that's the way it was portrayed in the novel. I guess the producers of the 2010 TV series just decided that they needed to inject some drama, probably because they just got bored and wanted to find some new way to tell a story that's been told for centuries.

Listener Michael asks: What do you think about the use of the Chinese language in the novel, and are there subtleties that are lost in the translation to English?

To the first part of that question, it's important to note that the novel was written not in the vernacular Chinese language, but in a style that sort of mimics classical or literary Chinese, an old form of the language that was used from the Spring and Autumn period through the end of the Han Dynasty. This old form is notable for its concise and compact style compared to vernacular Chinese. One effect of this stylistic choice is that the novel has pretty high information density. I've certainly noticed this in writing the scripts each week. It's not unusual for me to write a couple pages, only to realize that I've covered just a couple paragraphs in the Chinese text. In Chinese, there's a beauty to this conciseness and simplicity. However, when translated into English, it comes off as very matter-of-fact and no-frills. That is one reason why the English translation can often come off as dry.

Now, as for what else might be lost in the translation to English, I'd say that many of the poems scattered through the novel certainly lose something when translated. I think both the Moss Roberts

translation and the Brewitt-Taylor translation does a consistently solid job of capturing the meaning of the poems, but the meter, the rhyme, and the panache are often missing. Also, Chinese is a very visual language, in my opinion, and I think some of the imagery that one gets from just seeing the characters used fails to come through in the English versions.

Michael also asked: What other works of Chinese literature would you recommend to listeners who enjoyed the Romance of the Three Kingdoms?

Well, I'd definitely recommend the Water Margin, which is another of the four great classic Chinese novels and ranks right up there with the Three Kingdoms as one of my favorites. In fact, I almost decided to do a podcast on that book instead, and I still might, whenever I get done with the Three Kingdoms Podcast. It's set almost 1,000 years after the Three Kingdoms period, and it's about a group of outlaws who can best be described as 12th-century Chinese Klingons. Unlike the Three Kingdoms, the Water Margin, or Outlaws of the Marsh as it's also frequently called in English, is written in the vernacular and has a much livelier, much more colorful style. Also, whereas the Three Kingdoms focuses on the wheelings and dealings of emperors, kings, prime ministers, and generals, basically the highest levels of Chinese society, the Water Margin provides a glimpse into life across a spectrum of society: farmers, fishermen, restaurateurs, policemen, blacksmiths, teachers, priests, monks, butchers, and shopkeepers. Heck, just talking about this is getting me excited about the idea of doing that podcast.

Turning to Western literature, a couple listeners asked what I thought about comparisons of the novel to Game of Thrones.

There are many such comparisons, and if you want point-by-point comparisons, I'd suggest Googling for it. Listener Dan shared a [great one](#) that I'll link to in the script for this episode. It includes things like how Tywin Lannister is Cao Cao, which, yeah, I could see some of that.

I should put out there the caveat that I've only watched the first season of Game of Thrones. Yes, I know, I'm way behind. And I've just started reading the Game of Thrones books. So, based on that somewhat limited exposure, here what I'll say: You can certainly find many similarities between the two, but the Romance of the Three Kingdoms was written in the style of a chronicle of history rather than a novel. I already discussed the language used in the novel earlier. A notable result of this language is that the Three Kingdoms lacks the vivid character descriptions that Game of Thrones has. What character development the Three Kingdoms does contain is done very subtly, usually through accounts of the people's actions than overt descriptions of how someone was feeling.

I think this is one thing that makes the novel a difficult read for western audiences who are not used to this style and not familiar with the characters. Remember, when Luo Guanzhong was writing this, he was about a thousand years removed from the era about which he was writing, and the people and stories of the Three Kingdoms had already become a part of Chinese society and culture, so his readers had a baked-in, preexisting familiarity with those events and people.

And my last thought on the Three Kingdoms vs. Game of Thrones comparison is a point I made when I first started the podcast: Check back with me in about 800 years. The Romance of the Three Kingdoms has persisted in cultural significance and relevance for eight centuries -- as books, as stage performances, as stories told in teahouses, as radio programs, as TV shows, and as big-screen adaptations. Let's see Game of Thrones outdo that.

Alright, I think that's all the questions I've received. My apologies if I accidentally left out any. If I did, send me a reminder and I'll send you an answer. Thank you all so much again for checking out the

podcast, telling other people about it, rating it in iTunes (which really does help, by the way), sticking with me for 100 episodes, and sending in some great questions. Keep those comments and questions coming, and keep tuning in as we plow forward in the narrative, which will resume on the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!