

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 154.

So, here we are, the end of a journey that started on April 9, 2014, when I hit Publish on the first episode of this podcast -- an episode that I foolishly numbered episode zero, creating all sorts of metadata annoyances for myself for the next 154 episodes). I had no idea what kind of audience would be out there for this project. Well, after 4 years, 1 month, 5 days; 175 total episodes; more than 81 hours of recordings; 700,000-plus words of scripts; 2 computers; 2 crashed hard drives; and one lightning strike; I have my answer, and it's beyond anything I could have imagined. By industry standards, our numbers are by no means huge, but it's definitely bigger than what I could have expected, and the enthusiasm I have seen from you is simply unparalleled. So before anything else, let me say once again: Thank you so much for checking out my little corner of the podcast universe and for dragging others into it. You guys are awesome.

Many of you have asked what I'm doing next, and I'll get to that in a bit. But first, I want to do some reflection on the novel and the podcast. I explained in the first episode what the novel means to me. I see it as a quintessential part of Chinese culture, and I wanted to share it with people who may not have been familiar with it and might find it hard to get into due to the language barrier. Based on the enthusiasm I have seen in your emails and comments, I feel that goal has come to fruition. But more than that, I have found that in doing this podcast, I have greatly expanded my own understanding of the novel. When you are trying to not only recite a book, but also explain its many intricacies to an audience, you find yourself combing through its pages in a way you would not have done otherwise. Details that I had glossed over on previous readings and references that I only half-understood before now had to be explored and researched much more thoroughly so that I can explain it to you. And in that way, I have gained a whole new appreciation for the novel.

A listener asked why I think the novel has become so popular in China. I think there are many reasons for it. For one thing, the stories and characters of the novel are from more than 1,800 years ago, so they have had plenty of time to become ingrained in Chinese lore. The novel itself may have been written in the 14th century, but the historical text the Records of the Three Kingdoms was written during the Jin Dynasty, in the immediate aftermath of the Three Kingdoms era, and it's safe to say that there were likely already stories being told about the people and events from the era during that time.

Second, I think anyone who grew up in Chinese culture could see various Chinese values illustrated in the novel. Every society and every culture likes to present some kind of mythical, idealized vision of what its values are, how it sees itself. For me, the Romance of the Three Kingdoms embodies many of the values that we Chinese like to hold up as our ideals, such as the honor of Guan Yu; the loyalty, dedication, and wisdom of Zhuge Liang; the valor of Zhao Yun ; or the unbending principles of every court official who dared to speak up against the next would-be usurper, even it meant losing their head.

Beyond those values, I think the novel is appealing to the Chinese sensibility because one of the things that we Chinese have been taught to take pride in is our culture's long history, and the Romance of the Three Kingdoms goes right in line with that. I mean, just think about the opening line of the novel: Domains under heaven, long united, must divide; long divided, must unite. That one line right there perfectly encapsulates the long, cyclical nature of Chinese history, stretching back eons and flowing ever forward, much like the Great River rolling to the sea in the poem that preceded the first line of the novel.

And then, of course, there's the fact that these are just great stories and characters, much like the ancient Homeric epics or Arthurian legends that endure to this day in the West. Liu Bei's three visits to Zhuge Liang's thatched cottage, Zhao Yun's heroics in rescuing his lord's infant, Guan Yu's determination on his journey reunite with Liu Bei, the David vs. Goliath clash at Red Cliff. These are just captivating stories that have been told and retold throughout the centuries and still have resonance today.

Speaking of the novel's relevance today, that is something I have been thinking about for the past year as we approached the end of the podcast. What place do the themes of this novel hold in today's world? The novel has definitely had an impact on me personally. For instance, how many times have we heard someone in the novel talk about how it's not just the lord seeking out talented men, but that those talented individuals are also seeking worthy lords. I know that principle is definitely on my mind when it comes to my career, as working for an organization whose cause I believe in is a significant consideration.

Another theme I've been thinking a lot about lately is the breakdown of institutions. In the first portion of the novel, we see the institutions of the withering Han Dynasty collapsing, and I can't help but wonder if the people of that time recognized what they were witnessing. One incompetent emperor followed another, as one rebellion broke out after another, and as one usurper rose after another, all hacking away parts of the framework that had held the empire together for so long. Did people realize that they were watching the fall of an empire? Certainly they were aware that things were not going well, but did any of them seriously think that this dynasty, which had lasted nearly two centuries, was in fact on its last legs? Or did it only become oh so obvious in hindsight? Living in present-day America, it might not take a great feat of imagination to see some possible parallels, and it's a disquieting thought, to say the least.

Related to that is something else equally disquieting: Just how easy it is for people to fall in line and roll with things. I mean, think about every strong man that rose to power in the Han court, whether it's the eunuchs, Dong Zhuo, or Li Jue and Guo Si. Aside from a small handful of officials, the vast majority of the court simply fell into line behind whoever was in power. All you had to do was control the military and make a couple heads roll, and everybody else seems inclined to go with the flow for the sake of survival, even if it means being complicit in the breakdown of government and society.

Well, that's enough looking back. Let's look forward. Many of you have asked what I'm going to do next. So here's the big reveal. Yes, I am going to do another podcast. Yes, it's going to be similar to this one in that I will be introducing you to another classic Chinese tale. And that story is ... the Water Margin, aka Outlaws of the Marsh.

For those of you who are not familiar with it, it's another one of the four great classic Chinese novels. As the alternate English title indicates, it's about a bunch of outlaws holed up in ... a marsh. As my wife once upon a time described them, they're really like Klingons in 12th century China. And yes, it's as awesome as that sounds.

To let you in on a little secret, I ALMOST went with the Water Margin instead of the Three Kingdoms four years ago when I was trying to pick a topic for a podcast. I ended up going with the Three Kingdoms because it's set in the earliest time period among the four classic novels, and I felt that because of the way it was written, it was the least approachable of the four, so a podcast on the Three Kingdoms would provide greater value to anyone who's interested in classic Chinese literature. But now that I'm done with the Three Kingdoms, it makes sense to go on and do the Water Margins.

To give you an idea of what to expect, the Water Margin will be a rather different experience than the Three Kingdoms for several reasons. For one thing, it's written in much more accessible prose, and with much more, umm, colorful language. I mean, can you imagine the phrase "friggin' monkeyshines" in the Three Kingdoms? Yeah, me neither, but it's in the Water Margins, along with other rather expressive phrases.

Another difference is that whereas the Romance of the Three Kingdoms is said to be 70 percent history and 30 percent fiction, the Water Margin is more like 99 percent fiction and 1 percent history. The time period it's set in is real, and a few of the characters have some basis in history, but that's about

it. Everything else is made up, which is actually kind of liberating as it allows for more colorful storytelling.

Finally, there's another significant difference between the two novels. The Three Kingdoms may feature a cast of thousands, but it deals almost exclusively with the top tiers of society: emperors, lords, generals, and court officials. The civilian population is mentioned only in the vaguest of terms and only in passing, such as, "so-and-so sacked the city and then reassured the civilians that they would not slaughtered en masse."

The Water Margin, on the other hand, presents us with a vivid portrayal of life through all sectors of society -- paupers, peasants, princes, and kings. Whether is emperors, court officials, generals, soldiers, magistrates, cops, crooks, merchants, farmers, fishermen, pharmacists, blacksmiths, innkeepers, restaurateurs, monks, priests, or prostitutes, you'll find it in the Water Margin. In short, the Three Kingdoms is all about the lives of the 1 percent, while the Water Margin looks at the lives of the 99 percent, or at least, the unruly upstarts from the 99 percent. This cross-sectional view of society in 12th century China will give us an excellent opportunity to delve into the daily life and culture of the time. I'm getting excited just thinking about all the supplemental episodes I can do on various subjects.

Now that I have hopefully psyched you up for the next project, I'm afraid I'll have to dampen your enthusiasm a bit by telling you that it won't be coming until 2019. My plan is to take the remainder of 2018 to rest, refresh, and then start laying the groundwork for the new podcast. Yes, it's a somewhat long layoff, but there are several reasons I need to do this.

First, when I started the Three Kingdoms podcast four years ago, I was recovering from the first year after my wife and I had a child, during which time we were so mentally exhausted that the only thing we had the intellectual capacity to do in our down time was watch reruns of "Hercules: The Legendary Journeys." In 2014, I had recovered to the point where I wanted a project that was more intellectually

stimulating, and thus was born the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Well, I certainly found the intellectual stimulation I was looking for.

Fast forward to today, and that infant that was giving us baby brain is now 5 years old and ready to start kindergarten, which is probably going to be a big change from our routine the last few years. At the same time, my day job has gotten much busier, and I have also taken on a side gig teaching college courses. All of those things are great, but add it all up and it's a lot to juggle. I must admit that the last nine months or so have been pretty draining. That has not deterred me in the least about committing myself to do another podcast, but it does mean I need to get a handle on what my schedule going forward will be like, and how to best integrate a podcast into that so that I can give it the proper attention it requires.

A second reason is that after podcasting for four-plus years, I need a mental break from it so I can remember what life was like when I wasn't podcasting. When you do something day in and day out, it can become repetitive and you just start going through the motion sometimes, so I want to step away for a bit and come back with renewed energy and passion.

There are also some things I want to do before I start publishing the next podcast. I still want to go back and re-record some of the earlier episodes of the Three Kingdoms Podcast to bring them more inline with the later episodes quality-wise. I also need to do some things to make sure the content of the podcast will remain accessible for as long as possible. Link rot is one of the greatest challenges facing any project website when the project ends, and I want to make sure that doesn't happen here. As many a Three Kingdoms character have said, we all want to make sure our name go down in history for all eternity. That's a little hard to do if posterity is getting a page-not-found message when they try to access the website.

And finally, I need the down time to start reading and researching for the Water Margin podcast. I've learned a lot about podcasting in the last four years, and I want to put those lessons to good use to make this next project as good as it can be. That will take some careful thinking and planning.

So, expect to see some occasional updates on old episodes of the Three Kingdoms podcast in the next seven months. And then, if all goes well, look for the Water Margin podcast early in 2019. Stay subscribed to this feed, because I will definitely post an update here when that new podcast is ready to go. I'm excited about this next project, and I hope all of you are as well.

So, I will talk to you in 2019. Until then, let me once again convey my deepest appreciation for all your support, which has been easily the biggest motivation that has kept me on course throughout this project. It's been one helluva ride, and I hope you will continue to spread the word about the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.