

# A Comparative Study of the Acceptance of Ancient Chinese Popular Novels in the Chinese Character Cultural Circle of East Asia

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**Abstract:** Since ancient times, cultural exchanges between China and the countries belong to the Chinese character cultural circle have been very frequent. Among them, ancient Chinese popular novels have an important influence on the culture of the countries in the Chinese character cultural circle. *Water Margin*, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Journey to the West* are all great representative literary works during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. They are deeply loved by the people of Japan, South Korea and Vietnam. But these three countries have different emphasis on their acceptance. Japanese have a deep love for *Water Margin*, Koreans have a crush on *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and Vietnamese love *Journey to the West*. The differences in the acceptance of representative works of ancient Chinese popular novels in different countries reflect the differences in national psychology and cultural identity under different geographical conditions.

## 1. Introduction

The Ming and Qing Dynasties were the golden age of Chinese ancient popular novels. *Water Margin*, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Journey to the West* are outstanding representatives of ancient Chinese popular novels, and they are brilliant pearls in the history of Chinese literature. Ancient Chinese popular novels have gathered the essence of Chinese national culture, with wonderful artistic conception and sincere sentiment, profoundly reflecting the social scene at that time, and possessing a unique artistic style. Ancient Chinese popular novels not only made a significant contribution to the development of Chinese novels, but also had a profound impact on Japan, South Korea, Vietnam in the Chinese character cultural circle as a treasure of Chinese classical literature.

East Asian Chinese character cultural circle countries refer to the three countries of Japan, South Korea and Vietnam except China. These three countries have been deeply influenced by Chinese culture since ancient times. Countries such as Japan, South Korea and Vietnam that are deeply influenced by Chinese culture have formed the so-called "Chinese character cultural circle". Countries in the East Asian Chinese character cultural circle accepted Chinese culture very early and were deeply influenced by Chinese traditional culture. *Water Margin*, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and *Journey to the West* are all great representative literary works during the Ming and Qing dynasties [1]. However, due to different geographical locations and different national characters and cultural backgrounds, the people of the three countries have their own advantages. The Japanese prefer *Water Margin*, the Koreans prefer *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and the Vietnamese prefer *Journey to the West*. The three countries show both the same structure and heterogeneity in accepting ancient Chinese popular novels. This paper focuses on discussing the similarities and differences and the reasons for the acceptance of ancient Chinese popular novels in the East Asian Chinese character cultural circle.

## 2. The Deep Love of Japanese for Water Margin

Ancient Chinese popular novels are widely circulated in Japan. Among them, *Water Margin*,

*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and *Journey to the West* are especially popular among Japanese. Among the three works, *Water Margin* has the most influence. *The Hundred Masters of the World* written by Saburo Kitamura puts Shi Nai'an alongside Sakyamuni, Confucius, Washington, Napoleon, etc. *Water Margin* is even in Japanese schools' curriculum [2]. There are "Water Margin fans" among the Japanese.

*Water Margin* was introduced to Japan in the Edo period. So far, *Water Margin* has been circulating in Japan for nearly four hundred years. The earliest version that can be seen so far is the 110 chapters version in *The Complete Biography of Water Margin and the Three Kingdoms*. In addition, the early versions introduced to Japan include *The Water Margin of Loyalty* and *The Abridged Edition on the Water Margin* and so on. The Japanese reprint of *Water Margin* began in the Edo period. In 1728, Rin Kyuubee reprinted *The Water Margin of Loyalty*. In addition, *Popular Loyalty Water Margin* translated by Okajima Kashima in 1757 was published. After the translation was published, it was welcomed by the Japanese citizens and spread widely. The prelude of *Water Margin* was also unveiled.

The spread of *Water Margin* in Japan has profoundly influenced the creation of Japanese writers. From the 1870s onwards, novels based on *Water Margin* began to appear in Japanese literary circles, and they lasted for more than a century. *The Local Water Margin* created by Kenbe Ayazu in 1773 was the first work of "the Water Margin of Japan". Since then, many works have appeared in succession, such as *The Water Margin of Japan* by Sasaki Tengen, *The Female Water Margin* by Itami Tsubakien, and *The Water Margin of the Loyalists* by Yamahigashi Kyoten. It is worth mentioning that *The Legend of the Eight Samurai in Nansousatomi* created by Kyokutei Bakin, which portrayed eight knights in the image of Song Jiang. The story has also been continuously applied to Japanese Kabuki, movies and TV shows. The rise of the creation boom of "Water Margin of Japan" expanded the subject range of Japanese literature and quickly formed a new literary style-reading novels. Therefore, the introduction of *Water Margin* and the emergence of reverse novels are of great significance in the history of Japanese literature.

In other art fields, the influence of *Water Margin* is also great. There are no fewer than dozens of dramas and paintings adapted from *Water Margin* stories. The Japanese theater industry created the musical *Water Margin*. In addition, the Kabuki *New Water Margin* adapted by Kenzo Hirata also performed in China. In terms of painting, there is a comic strip of *Water Margin* by Yokoyama Mitsuteru, Yanagawa Tauteu painted *Water Margin* story book, Katsushika Hokusai painted *New Water Margin Painting*. In addition, the popular sporting event "Sumo" in Japan is said to be related to the prodigal Yanqing. There is even a Japanese sumo wrestler who once named himself after the Liangshan hero "Nine-Dragons Shijin".

The main reason why *Water Margin* is so popular among Japanese people is that *Water Margin* conforms to the unique aesthetic mentality and value orientation of Japanese people. Japan has had martial arts and chivalrous plots since ancient times, and the martial arts spirit runs through the core of the Japanese spiritual world. The morality of the Japanese samurai class and the Bushido spirit are "righteousness" and "courage". The spirit of "loyalty" promoted in *Water Margin* is in line with the traditional moral beliefs of loyalty and justice of the Japanese nation. The heroes of Liangshan described in *Water Margin* are consistent with the samurai spirit and moral value orientation of loyal, brave, valiant, and justice among the Japanese nationals. It can be said that *Water Margin* reflects the social character and national characteristics of Japan. As a result, *Water Margin* was greatly favored and valued by the Japanese nation, and even had a long-lasting and far-reaching influence.

### 3. Koreans' Special Preference to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms

In South Korea, the most popular Chinese ancient popular novel is *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* has a wide range of readers, and all classes of men, women and children love it. Not only the Korean classic novels, but also the ancient tune, poem-song, Panseri, and folk beliefs are all affected by the content of the novels.

The earliest record of the spread of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in North Korea is the

*Sonjo Factual Record* volumn 3, the second year of Sonjo, June Imjin [3]. It can be seen that *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* had spread to Korea as early as the second year of King Sunjo (1569). After *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was introduced to Korea, it was printed and published many times. For example, *Guan Hwa Tang's First Talented Scholar Book* and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms Folk Version*, were widely spread. Later, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was published again during the reign of King Sukjong in Korea, and its book was titled *Guan Hwa Tang's First Talented Scholar Book* or *Ding Zhi Record*. There are many Korean translations of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and there are two main types that can specify the specific publication and copying time, namely, *The Korean woodcut* collected by Mr. Kim Dong-wook, published in Hongshudong in 1859; and Lee's *Three Kingdoms* (17 volumes of transcripts) collected by Korean Central Library in 1871.

With the spread of *The Popular Romance of the Three Kingdoms* on the Korean Peninsula, Korean literati created a series of Korean novels based on readers' reading needs, using this novel as a model, and opened up the development of the history of Korean novels. They can be divided into the following categories according to types: 1. Complete translations such as *The Popular Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Three Kingdoms*; 2. Partial translations such as *The Chibi War* and *Record of Bold Jiang Wei*; 3. The translation (modified) such as *Record of Guan Yun Chang*, *Records of Zhang Fei and Ma Chao*; 4. Re-creation such as *Mrs. Huang Biography*, *Dream of Zhuge Liang* and so on. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* also had an impact on the military talk novels. Such as *Imjin Record*, *Liu Wenxing Biography*, *Liu Zhonglie Biography* and so on. In addition to military stories, traces of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* can also be seen in other types of novels such as *Nine Clouds Dream* and *Dream of the Jade Mansion*.

"The Romance of the Three Kingdoms" also had a huge impact on other Korean art forms such as Panseri, ancient tune and poem-song. Panseri is an ancient acappella art in Korea. There are only five remaining Panseri. Among them, *Chibi Song* is the only work based on China and from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. In addition, the other four works are also deeply influenced by it. In terms of timing, according to the *Complete Works of Ancient Tune of the Past Dynasties*, there are more than 80 timing works related to the content of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Poem-songs such as *Lepin Song*, *Siqin Song*, *Yulou Banquet Song*, etc. are also deeply influenced by it.

*The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* also has an impact on South Korean folk beliefs. For example, there are Guan Yu temples in all parts of South Korea. The belief in Guan Yu was first introduced through the aid of the Ming army generals who resisted Korea to fight against Japan. However, the introduction and prosperity of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* undoubtedly affected the localization of Guan Yu's beliefs played a driving role.

South Koreans admire "The Romance of the Three Kingdoms", mainly because it is full of Confucian "loyalty" ideas, and it also caters to the needs of the Korean Dynasty [4]. The Korean Dynasty advocated Confucianism and saw it as the country's fundamental thinking. It advocated "loyalty to the monarch and patriotism". The "Loyalty" thought in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is in line with this national policy. The Korean Dynasty also recognized the educational function of "The Romance of the Three Kingdoms". Not only that, the emotional tendencies and value orientations expressed in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* also catered to all strata of Korea. The moral values of loyalty and filial piety embodied therein not only took root in the hearts of the Korean people, but Guan Yu, Zhuge Liang, etc. were regarded as Confucian loyalty ideas. The representatives of the Korean people have become the objects of admiration. At that time, "women and children could recite the stories" and "most scholars refused to read history" [5], they talked about stories in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and even the imperial examinations were titled *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* has consolidated the ethics and order of Korean society, and thus constitutes a part of the Korean national spirit, the national soul of loyalty. As for foreign literary works, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is the most important influence on South Korea.

#### 4. The Vietnamese's Love for Journey to the West

Vietnam is one of the countries in the Chinese character cultural circle. Since ancient times, it has been deeply influenced by Chinese culture. Judging from the currently known materials, *Journey to the West* was introduced to Vietnam for the earliest time. As early as the Chữ Nôm period (the ancient writing system of Vietnam), *Journey to the West* already had a rewritten version of Zinan. This shows that *Journey to the West* has been introduced to Vietnam for a long time.

In addition to the rewritten version of *Journey to the West* by Chữ Nôm, as early as 1914, there was a translation of Chen Feng's manuscript. Later, it was published by Le Ku, Ruan Gongjiao, Huang Mingzi and Su Zheng's translation [5]. The book translated by Rui Ding in 1961 was published by Hanoi General Publishing House. This is a small abridged full translation based on the 1957 typography of Beijing Writers Publishing House. In addition to the illustrations of *Journey to the West* taken from the album published by Shanghai Fine Arts Publishing House, there are four research articles in the translation.

The translation of “Journey to the West” is the most colorful. Among the many translations, the Shuiting translation edited by Zhou Shan and the translations of Rushan, Mei Chunhai, and Fang Ying are regarded as better versions. Until recent years, some people still expressed dissatisfaction with these existing translations and translated them again. The appearance of many translations and repeated reprints proves its popularity and attention in Vietnam.

*Journey to the West* has a certain influence on some works of Vietnamese literature. In particular, it has a positive impact on the birth of the medieval chapter novels in Vietnam. The influence of *Journey to the West* on the medieval chapter novels in Vietnam is in style. It has brought a new style of style to Vietnamese literature-chapter style. The rewritten Chữ Nôm version of *Journey to the West*, *Journey to the West*, was born in the 18th century. The Chữ Nôm version of *Journey to the West* includes 1008 sentences and six-eight poems, imitating a part of Wu Chengen's *Journey to the West*. The biggest and the most significant part of the version is the adaptation of the literary form. The chapter style of the original work has been adapted into the six-eight Chữ Nôm poem biography. In addition, *Journey to the West* also had an impact on the stage scripts of Vietnam's Middle Ages. *Journey to the West* has been transformed and adapted into many ancient Vietnamese dramas such as *Tang Monk's Pilgrimage for Buddhist Scriptures in the Journey to the West*, *The Enka of Journey to the West*, *Journey to the West* and other repertoires [6]. It is a masterpiece which has a long history of influence in Vietnamese stage art.

*Journey to the West* is so popular in Vietnam because of the influence of Vietnamese culture and social factors. There are many similarities between Vietnamese and Chinese cultures. The similarity of culture makes *Journey to the West* more suitable for Vietnamese psychology. Vietnamese people are particularly interested in Chinese cultural knowledge. Vietnamese Eastern cultural genes determine that works from China are easier to accept and can be welcomed. *Journey to the West* is more suitable for the mentality of the Vietnamese. There are many factors of Buddhism and Taoism in *Journey to the West*. Because of these factors, it is easy to be recognized by the Vietnamese, because Buddhism and Taoism are two religions that entered and developed very early in Vietnam. The soul has a profound impact. The Buddhist and Taoist factors in *Journey to the West* make it easy for Vietnamese to accept and love because it is closer to the religion and beliefs of the Vietnamese. In addition, from the perspective of social factors, *Journey to the West* is also a spiritual bridge for the Vietnamese and a link between parents and children in Vietnamese families. In short, *Journey to the West* has given Vietnamese people a kind of encouragement and recognition, so that Vietnamese people believe in their beliefs more firmly, and get a kind of comfort and support from it. This is the reason why *Journey to the West* is so popular among Vietnamese.

#### 5. Conclusion

Countries in the East Asian Chinese character cultural circle are deeply influenced by Chinese culture, and ancient Chinese popular novels are shining pearls of Chinese culture. But different countries have different emphasis on their acceptance [7]. Japanese have a deep love for *Water*

*Margin*, Koreans have a crush on *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and Vietnamese love *Journey to the West*. This reflects the different artistic styles of the three works. *Water Margin* represents peaceful and rebellious, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* advocates loyalty and wisdom, and *Journey to the West* is mysterious and romantic and full of fantasy. It also reflects the ancient rulers' taste to different arts. The Emperor of Japan only loved *Water Margin*, the king of Korea loved *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and the King of Vietnam preferred *Journey to the West*. It also reflects the different national characters and cultural identities of the three countries under different geographical conditions. The 'Three Kingdoms' acceptance of ancient Chinese popular novels also depends on what they need. The Japanese prefer *Water Margin*, the Koreans like *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and the Vietnamese like *Journey to the West*. The difference in the acceptance of these three works in the three countries reflects that the countries in the Chinese character cultural circle have shown both homogeneity and heterogeneity in the process of disseminating Chinese culture [8]. It is precisely because of these differences that the Chinese culture has been enriched and developed, and the dissemination of Chinese culture has shown more complexity and diversity. In the future, the dissemination of Chinese culture in the countries of the Chinese character culture circle will definitely be more splendid and eye-catching.

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