

How Three Kingdoms Became a National Novel of Korea: From Sanguozhi yanyi to Samgukchi. By Hyuk-chan Kwon. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2023. 243 pages. ISBN: 9789004536975.

Hyuk-chan Kwon's *How Three Kingdoms Became a National Novel of Korea: From Sanguozhi yanyi to Samgukchi* provides a holistic chronological depiction of how *Sanguozhi yanyi* 三國志演義 (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*; also called *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義, referred to as *Three Kingdoms* throughout the book) achieved canonical status in the Korean literary tradition and gradually became a national novel for Korea in the past 450 years since its first complete publication in 1522. Not only does the book provide an exhaustive historical perspective of the influence of *Three Kingdoms* in Korea since the Chosŏn period (1392–1910), Kwon states that “*Three Kingdoms* has been Korea’s most frequently circulated novel since its dissemination to Chosŏn in the sixteenth century” (145); it is also the first monograph on the influence of *Three Kingdoms* in Korea in English, particularly how it helps contextualize Korean history and culture (3).

The book could be divided into two sections, with the first exploring the reasons for the wide circulation, reception, and influence of *Three Kingdoms* since the late imperial period (185) and the second showing that *Three Kingdoms* remains the most widely read novel in South Korea because of the Korean rewritten versions of *Three Kingdoms* and the marketing strategy of these rewritten versions. The monograph starts with a general overview of the impact of *Three Kingdoms* since its first importation during the Chosŏn period. This discussion is followed by how the meritocratic Korean *yangban* 兩班 literati made the translation and circulation of Chinese fiction possible in premodern Korea, with the main focus on the circulation of *Three Kingdoms* as an example. Given that the Korean literati had been well trained in Literary Sinitic (*wenyan wen* 文言文 or *hanmun* 漢文) since the Koryŏ period (918–1392), they had the ability to study the Confucian classics and Chinese fiction written in Literary Sinitic. Among the four masterworks of Ming novels—*Three Kingdoms*, *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (*Water Margin*), *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (*Journey to the West*), and *Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅 (*The Plum in a Golden Vase*)—“*Three Kingdoms* was the only novel of which the text was written mostly in simple Literary Sinitic with relatively less Vernacular

Sinitic vocabulary” (8). Therefore, according to Kwon, *Three Kingdoms* was widely read, translated, and circulated in the Chosŏn dynasty.

Although the Chosŏn period’s *yangban* literati disapproved of the habit of reading fictional narratives (a genre of entertainment) because doing so would hinder the study and the transmission of Confucian ideals (the orthodox doctrines), Kwon argues that *Three Kingdoms* attracted a wide readership in the Chosŏn period, based on Andrew Plak’s comment that the four masterworks of Ming novels were “the most systematic form of intellectual pursuit” and “were not written merely as popular entertainment for the shopkeeper’s mentality” (18). Among the four great Ming novels, *Three Kingdoms* was the first to be “written by well-versed intellectuals in a sophisticated manner” (18). This challenges later Imperial Chinese scholars’ general perception that fictional narratives “are less serious and less intellectually sophisticated works compared to poems and texts of history and philosophy” (18). In addition, Kwon claims the popularity of *Three Kingdoms* in mid-Chosŏn society stems from the two war periods—the Imjin War 壬辰倭亂 with the Japanese in 1592 and the Pyŏngja War 丙子胡亂 (fighting against the Qing invasion of the *pyŏngja* year [1636] and the *chŏngch’uk* 丁丑 year [1637]): “Scarred by the ravages of war, many commoners yearned for the appearance of war heroes endowed with the virtues of loyalty (“*ch’ung* 충” in Korean, “Zhong 忠” in Chinese) and righteousness (“*ŭi* 의” in Korean, “yi 義” in Chinese), which happened to be the most emphasized values of *Three Kingdoms*” (21). The brief discussion of the two war periods paves a path for the detailed discussion of the wars’ impact on the dissemination of *Three Kingdoms* in mid-to-late-Chosŏn Korea in Chapter 4. Kwon argues the above reasons led to the acceptance of *Three Kingdoms* during the Chosŏn period.

After exploring the reasons for the wide readership of *Three Kingdoms* in the Chosŏn period, Kwon provides a concrete account of how *Three Kingdoms* was disseminated, printed, and circulated in Chosŏn Korea in Chapter 3. The chapter begins by providing historical literary evidence that *Three Kingdoms* was initially imported from China to Korea not long after its first complete publication in 1522, and the wide readership among the *yangban* literati readers could prove that the printing of *Three Kingdoms* by the Editorial Bureau happened before 1569 (39) and that “its reprints published in Korea and subsequent widespread circulation impacted literary trends and the development of book markets

in Korea” (4) since the Chosŏn period. Then Kwon highlights the significance of Guan Yu 關羽, a key figure in *Three Kingdoms*, in the development of Korean folk literature and religion as a war hero. The detailed discussion of Guan Yu’s character development in Korean culture showcases the impact of *Three Kingdoms* on Korean social and literary culture.

Following the historical line, Chapter 4 delves into the sociopolitical and ideological context of mid-to-late-Chosŏn Korea, which enabled the acceptance and spread of *Three Kingdoms*. The chapter commences by showing the identity crisis of Chosŏn Korea due to the Imjin War and Pyŏngja War and illustrates how Chosŏn rulers, who identified themselves with the rulers of the state of Shu-Han, utilized Neo-Confucian values in *Three Kingdoms* to reinforce and uphold Korea’s position as the legitimate successor of the Great Ming Empire of Han China following its downfall in 1644. The chapter ends with Kwon stating, “The [Chosŏn literati] Korean sympathy for Shu-Han legitimacy in this particular sociopolitical context accorded with the dissemination of the *Three Kingdoms* in the period after the Pyŏngja War” (108), reinforcing the two war periods’ impact on the wide spread of *Three Kingdoms* in Chosŏn Korea. The thorough depiction of the identity crisis of the Chosŏn literati echoes the author’s objective of providing a discussion of the significance of *Three Kingdoms* in Korea from a historical perspective.

In 1910, the period of Chosŏn Korea came to an end as Japan invaded Korea, starting the 35-year colonial period. Even though Japanese compulsorily became the official language in 1942, “the readership of *Three Kingdoms* showed no signs of abating during the Japanese colonial period” (109). Kwon argues in Chapter 5 that this occurred due to the strong prevailing reception of *Three Kingdoms*, which stemmed from the impact caused by Yoshikawa Eiji’s 吉川英治 (1892–1962) modern Japanese vernacular translation of the *Three Kingdoms*. Kwon speculates the increase in readership and circulation of *Three Kingdoms* in colonial Korea was caused by critical social changes, such as modernization, the development of printing technology, and cultural influences from Japan and the West (4). Kwon then provides a detailed discussion of modernization’s significant role in expanding the readership of *Three Kingdoms*: “It was the Westernization of Korea, which had been forcibly imposed on Korea by the Japanese colonial government in the name of modernization in the early twentieth century, which enable[d] magazines and newspapers to emerge and quickly gain a sizeable readership” (131).

Furthermore, “*Three Kingdoms* became the first Chinese historical novel serialized in a major Korean newspaper” (131). These comments pointedly highlight the possibility that *Three Kingdoms* became widespread in the early twentieth century due to its serialization in newspapers.

In the penultimate chapter, Chapter 6, Kwon examines the reasons for the long-lasting popularity of *Three Kingdoms* in contemporary South Korea. He argues that the trend among Korean authors of rewriting *Three Kingdoms* and the strong acceptance of these rewritten versions contribute to the book’s long-lasting and influential status in South Korean popular culture and literature. Kwon meticulously depicts the success of three Korean rewritten versions of *Three Kingdoms*, by Yi Mun-yol 李文烈 (1948), Hwang Sok-yong 黃皙暎 (1943), and Jang Jeong-il 蔣正一 (1962). In this chapter, Kwon specifically examines the various depictions of the fictional character Diaochan 貂蟬 in the three popular Korean rewritten versions of *Three Kingdoms* to argue that it is “in fact is a total rewriting based on translator’s ideology” (168). Kwon first cites Yi’s description of Diaochan as an “earthy and licentious woman rather than a martyr who sacrifices her chastity for the greater good” (171) whereas Hwang tries to be faithful to the original characterization of Diaochan in the Chinese original of *Three Kingdoms*, who is Wang Yun’s household entertainer and serves as bait by acting as a “beautiful woman snare or *meiren ji* 美人計” (169). However, Chang refutes the claims of the previous two Korean translators by depicting Diaochan as a female character without any political agenda but with her own subjectivity. In Jang’s representation of Diaochan, “Her ambivalent feelings about Dong Zhuo and Lü Bu can be interpreted as a down-to-earth, practical, and plausible hesitation between Dong’s political power and Lü’s masculine attractiveness” (173), this comment highlights Diaochan’s subjectivity. The three different representations of Diaochan in the Korean rewritten versions demonstrate that the *Three Kingdoms* gradually transformed from an imported novel from China, *Sanguozhi yanyi*, into “a national novel of Korea,” *Samgukchi* 삼국지. Apart from the success and wide acceptance of the Korean rewritten versions of *Three Kingdoms* in South Korea, Kwon cites the importance of the marketing strategy to promote *Three Kingdoms* as a tool for succeeding in college entrance examinations and a self-help guide in the South Korean market, which he claims contribute to its long-standing status and even makes *Three Kingdoms* a Korean national novel.

Hyuk-chan Kwon concludes by citing the strong impact of *Three Kingdoms* in Korean history and stating that it could be regarded as a

national novel in Chapter 7 with a thorough and comprehensive closing remark. In this chapter, he also indicates the strong male gender bias in the readership arises due to the war nature of *Three Kingdoms* (making the male readership ten times larger than the female readership) (185–186). Also, Kwon predicts the prevailing influence of *Three Kingdoms* in South Korea during the digital era because it is “being revived as an interactive text and is relived each time a new alterative history is written by players of the digital games” (186). This prediction could be expanded as another monograph-length work for discussion.

As the author indicates in the book’s introduction, this monograph provides important scholarship, for on one hand, it is the first English-language monograph on this topic, and on the other, it provides a historical perspective on the influence of *Three Kingdoms* (a classic Chinese novel) on Korean culture and how it helps contextualize Korean history and culture.

Kaby Kung
Hong Kong Metropolitan University
Hong Kong, China
kkung@hkmu.edu.hk