

Chinese novels

The so-called 'Four Great Novels of Chinese literature' (*sida mingzhu* 四大名著) are the novels commonly thought to have had the greatest influence on Chinese culture.

The *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguozhi yanyi* 三国志演义) is a historical novel set at the time of the Three Kingdoms (AD 220- 265) following the fall of the Han dynasty (206 BC- AD 220). Written by Luo Guanzhong 罗贯中 (c. AD 1330-1400), probably in the early Ming dynasty (AD 1368-1644), it is based on legends concerning the Three Kingdoms period, made popular by storytellers and theatrical performers and also in historical writings. Its earliest extant edition dates to AD 1522. The novel supports the declining Han dynasty, a period in which Confucian orthodoxy prevailed, and views those that oppose the Han government as evildoers. The support for Confucian values of loyalty and justice are seen from the opening chapters of the novel, when at the time of the Yellow Turban Uprising (*Huang jin zhi luan* 黄巾之乱) the three main heroes of the story Liu Bei (刘 备), Guan Yu (关 羽) and Zhang Fei (张 飞) swear an oath of brotherhood and pledge to serve the Emperor and the common people.

The Water Margin (*Shuihu zhuan* 水浒传) (also known as *Outlaws of the Marsh* or *All Men are Brothers*) is familiar to British audiences from the Japanese television series screened on British television in the 1970s. The stories that make up *The Water Margin*, sometimes referred to as 'Chinese Robin Hood tales', tell of a band of 108 outlaws who have, for one reason or another, turned their backs on the corruption of Song dynasty (AD 960-1279) officials, in particular the evil Gao Qiu 高俅, to lead a life of banditry. The bandits' way of life strongly emphasises brotherhood under the slogan 'carry out the true way on behalf of heaven' (*ti tian xing dao* 替天行道). This episodic novel tells the stories of the individual outlaws and culminates with the band's surrender to the Song court and their ultimate demise at the hands of a rival band in a battle fought on behalf of the government. To serve the government and the emperor, who was ultimately 'the son of heaven', had long been the ambition of the leader Song Jiang 宋江 but had previously been made impossible by the evil of Gao Qiu.

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CHINA
JOURNEY TO THE EAST

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Journey to the West (*Xiyouji* 西游记) is better known to British audiences by the title *Monkey* from the translation of the novel by Arthur Waley and from the Japanese Television series screened on British television in the 1980s. The story is based on a true story of a monk Xuanzang 玄奘 who travelled to India during the Tang dynasty (AD 618-906) to collect the Buddhist sutras, translate and take them back to China. The fictional account written in the Ming dynasty (AD 1368-1644) by Wu Cheng'en 吳承恩 tells the story of Xuanzang and his disciples Sun Wukong 孫悟空 ('the Monkey King'), Zhu Bajie 豬八戒 ('Piggy'), Sha Wujing 沙悟淨 ('Sandy') and a white horse, originally a prince, the third son of the Jade-Dragon (*yulong san taizi* 玉龍三太子), all of whom had originally behaved in a manner contrary to the precepts of Buddhism and who join the monk on his journey to atone for their behaviour and to become fully fledged monks in their own right. The adventures of the team in their long journey to India are loved by Chinese both young and old, have been used as the basis for countless drama and opera performances over the centuries. The underlying message of the book is one of the spiritual journey of an individual in a quest for enlightenment and the ultimate goal of the attainment of Buddhahood.

The Dream of the Red Chamber (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢), also known as '*The Story of the Stone*' (*Shitouji* 石頭記), was written in the mid-Qing dynasty by Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (c. AD 1715-1763). Only the first 80 chapters of the novel were written by Cao, the remaining 40 chapters having been completed by Gao E 高鶚 (c. AD 1740-1815). After the author's death, in 1791, but before its publication, the novel had been circulated amongst Cao Xueqin's friends and members of the literati. The novel traces the lives of members of the wealthy Jia 賈 family, their fall from imperial grace and the subsequent confiscation of their property and possessions. At the same time it is a tragic love story between Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉 and his consumptive cousin Lin Daiyu 林黛玉 and Baoyu's subsequent marriage to another cousin Xue Baochai 薛寶釵. Underlying these, and many other subplots, is the dichotomy between the concepts of the real and the imaginary including the contrasting worlds of the other worldly 'Prospect Garden' (*Daguan yuan* 大觀園), in which the young people live and the two branches of the Jia clan, House Rongguo (*Rongguo fu* 榮國府) and House Ningguo (*Ningguo fu* 寧國府), and their compounds occupied by the adult members of the family.

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