Chinese literature

The “Four Great Novels of Chinese literature” (Sida mingzhu 四大名著) are the four novels commonly thought to have been the most influential on Chinese culture. They are in chronological order:

1. The Romance of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguo yanyi 三國演義) is an historical novel set at the time of Three Kingdoms (220- 265) which follows the fall of the Han dynasty (206BC-220AD). Written by Luo Guanzhong (羅貫中, c.1330-1400), probably in the early Ming dynasty (1368-1644), it is based on legends concerning the period, made popular by storytellers and theatrical performers and also on historical writings. Before its first publication in 1522 it had circulated in hand-written versions. The novel shows support for 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 even in the opening chapters of the novel, when at the time of the yellow turban uprising the three main heroes of the story Liu Bei (劉備), Guan Yu (關羽) and Zhang Fei (張飛) swear an oath of brotherhood and pledge to serve the Emperor and the common people.

2. Both the Water Margin (Shuihuzhuan 水滸傳) (also known as Outlaws of the Marsh or All Men are Brothers) and Monkey are familiar to English audiences because of the Japanese television series screened on British television in the 70s and 80s. The stories that make up the the Water Margin, sometimes referred to as “Chinese Robin Hood tales”, tell of a band 108 outlaws who have, for one reason or another, have turned their backs on the corruption of Song dynasty officials, in particularly 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 but had been previously made impossible by the evil of the Gao Qiu. When Gao
Qiu realized that he could get rid of the bandits by setting them against their rivals he petitioned the emperor to have the band accepted as legitimate subjects of the government.

3. *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji 西遊記*) is better known to English audiences by the title *Monkey* from the translation of the novel by Arthur Waley and from the Japanese Television series screened on English television in the 1970s. The story is based on a true story of a monk Xuanzang (玄奘) who travelled to India during the Tang dynasty (618-906) to collect the Buddhist sutras, translate them and take them back to China. The fictional account written in the Ming dynasty 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)”Pigsy”, “Sandy” Sha Wujing (沙悟淨) Sha Heshang (沙和尚) and a White horse, originally the 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 joined 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 his quest for enlightenment and the ultimate goal of the attainment of Buddhahood.

4. *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) (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). Previously the novel had been circulated amongst Cao Xueqin’s friends and members of the literati, before its publication, after the author’s death in 1791. The novel traces the lives of members of the wealthy Jia 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). Underling these, and many other sub-plots, is
the dichotomy between the concepts of the real and the imaginary including the contrasting worlds of the other-worldly Prospect Garden, in which the young people live and two houses, Rongguo fu and Ningguo fu, occupied by the adult members of the family.