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Pengzi Rao & Jingyi Wei (TRanslator)

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A "Court Model" of Cultural Influence — *Romance of Three Kingdoms* in Thailand

Jinan Unive. Rao Pengzi

Trans. by Wei Jingyi

The study of China's cultural influence overseas has attracted considerable attention from the intellectual circle in the past few years, but scholars tend to cast influence of Chinese culture in Southeast Asia has a much longer history and much deeper impact. Thailand is one of those countries that were heavily influenced by Chinese culture, but the manner in which such an influence was absorbed was unique. The aim of this essay is to explore the pattern of selection, acceptance and internalization of Chinese culture by the receptor through a case study: the spread of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* in Thailand.

China and Thailand have always been good neighbors, and the cultural dialogues between the two started at a very early time. Far back in the Three Kingdoms Period(220 - 265), officials from Kingdom Wu were sent by the king on a diplomatic mission to visit several southeastern countries such as Phnom in the year of 245. In the works they wrote after their return, there are various accounts about the area where is today's Thailand.^① The kingdom of Dvaravati,^② located at the low reaches of Menam River, is also mentioned in *Notes on the West Religions Of the Great Tang*^③ written by the reverend Buddhist monk Xuan Zhuang in the 7th century. These detailed descriptions about Dvaravati in the official records of ancient China testify to the existing close contacts between the two countries at the time. Under the reign of Emperor Li Shiming of the Tang dynasty, Dvaravati twice sent its emissaries to China, who were well received by the Tang court

in the capital city of Chang An. In 1115, the 5th year of Zhenghe during the reign of Emperor Huizong of the Song dynasty, Chinese emissaries were dispatched to visit the kingdom of Lavo within the area of Thailand. During the Yuan dynasty (1271 - 1368), emissaries from Lavo visited China 5 times. The newly set - up kingdom of Sukhothai,^④ which was established in 1238, also attached great importance to a good relationship with China. In 1292, Rama Khaamheng, king of Sukhothai, sent his emissaries to China to present the friendly "documents carved on golden leaves". During the forty years of his reign, he dispatched emissaries to visit China for altogether 6 times. In 1299, the Yuan court bestowed on him such official gifts as "jade clothes with fine gold wire" and prince's sign of "jade tiger seal".^⑤ After the Yuan dynasty was replaced by the Ming dynasty (1368 - 1644), China kept a close relationship with Kingdom Aayudhya, which was in the area of Today's Thailand. According to the historical records of the Ming dynasty, during the two hundred and seventy years of the Mong dynasty, Ayudhya dispatched envoys to China for 112 times, while China to the kingdom for 19 times. The first emperor of the Ming dynasty Zhu Yuanzhang (1368 - 1398) sent his special emissary to Ayudhya to grant the King "the Seal of the kingdom".^⑥ After that, "Silam" began to be used as the official

Name of the kingdom. Cultural exchanges between China and Thailand became more active during the Ming dynasty. In 1368, the inaugural year of the first emperor of the Ming, Thailand began to send its students to study at the Central Royal School of China. In 1515, the Ming court chose from the entourage of Silam's tributary several translators to work in the "Siyi Legation" (the equivalent of Department of Foreign Relations) for teaching the Thai language and training local translators. In 1578, "the Silam Section" was added to the Siyi Legation and 12 students were enrolled to learn the language of the Thai.^⑦ With such frequent cultural exchanges between China and Thailand in the course of several hundred years, Chinese culture was permeated into the latter and became an important factor for the development of the Thai culture.

The dissemination of Chinese literature in Thailand took place against a background of close contacts and conscious exchanges between the two peoples. Due to historical and geographical factors, many Chinese, especially people from Guangdong and Fujian, the two provinces along the Southeastern China coast, went to settle down in Thailand. It is through those emigrants that ancient Chinese drama and poetry was brought to the country. Yet the most widespread and influential Chinese literary genre in Thailand is not poetry, nor drama, but novel, particularly historical novel such as *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*. The introduction and spread of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* in Thailand owes much to the advocating by the First King of Thailand's Bangkok dynasty, Yot Fa Chulolok Maha Chakri Parama Nat (Rama the First). As founder of the Dynasty, Rama the First (1782 – 1809) was faced with the historical mission of maintaining social stability within the country as well as safeguarding the national sovereignty against the military threat from its neighboring countries soon after ascending to the throne. In order to keep the country from war and turmoil, he tries hard to restore and develop the political system of centralized power of feudalism. At the same time, he submitted on his own initiative a diplomatic documentation to the Chinese Qing government expressing his willingness to seek to maintain the tributary relation with China and to expand the Sino – Thai trade.^⑧ To revive and enrich the literature of Bangkok, he convened a national meeting attended by both scholars from the Buddhist sector and laymen, calling on them to make good use of their talent to create literary works for the sake of the dynasty. Rama the First himself also participated in such an endeavor and wrote *A Long Eulogy On the frontier of Resistance Against Burma*. Thanks to the Chinese language enhancement class in the Palace, there were quite a few people at the court who could read classic Chinese novels in the original. The Chinese historical novel opened a new horizon before their eyes and immensely stimulated their interest in China. Their great enthusiasm showed that they were eager to seek for the spiritual wealth from the Chinese historical novels. It was just under this cultural context that

Rama the First personally issued an imperial order to have Chao Pha Ya Pha Kang, a minister and a poet, take charge of the translation of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* .

The translation of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* was accomplished in 1806. Before its printed version reached the commonality, the novel was first circulated within the court in the form of hand-written copies. Soon afterwards, a craze for "*The Romance of Three Kingdoms*" surged throughout the country. After countless duplications for over half a century, hand-written copy of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* was officially put into print. The publication elicited such a great demand that the book had to be reprinted many times, for instance it was printed 6 times just in the reign of Rama the Fifth (1868 - 1901). By the beginning of the 70's of this century, the book has gone through a total of 15 editions, making it the highest printing record of all the classic Chinese novels in Thai language. Containing only 87 chapters, the hand-written version was obviously incomplete. So, in 1978, a Thai writer named Wan Na Wa retranslated the 120-chapter version of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* from Chinese into Thai. The appearance of the complete translation aroused another "craze for *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*" among the Thai people.^⑨ Actually, over the period of more than half a century before the complete version, several stories from the novel's previous translation such as "Emperor Xian" (A. D. 190 - 220), "Diao Chan and Dong Zhuo", "Lu Bu and Dong Zhuo", and Zhou Yu "etc. had been adapted by the Thai writers into song-and-dance drama plays, which were very popular both in cities and countryside. Meanwhile, a genre of opera and a literary form of talk-and-sing based on *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* began to appear in the circles of literature and entertainment in Thailand. The fondness of the Thai court over classical Chinese novels as well as the kings' personal love for *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* could also be seen in ornaments of Chinese calligraphy and colored paintings in the Palace, which were out of the Three Kingdom stories such as "Oath into Brotherhood at the Peach Garden", "Empty-City Stratagem" and "Pavilion of the Elegant

Phoenix" etc. In the mansion houses of some princes and ministers, carvings and paintings on buildings of Chinese style were also thematically drawn from the outstanding figures and important events of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*. In the past, poetry had been the major literary form in Thailand. With the popularity of the translation of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* in prose version, there appeared a unique "Three Kingdom Style", which helped to transfer from a poetry-based Thai literature to a prose-based modern one. The spread and influence of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* in Thailand has lasted for more than two centuries. Today, it still maintains an impetus. As recently as the middle part of this century, quite a few re-written and adapted works of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* in the Thai language were still in production in the literary circle. Instead of being faithful translations, those works are in fact original re-creations where the figures and stories of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* are merely employed as raw subject matter.^⑩ They are no longer stories of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* in the Chinese sense, but rather an expression of the Thai cultural concepts within a particular frame. The stories of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* were so popular and influential in Thailand that the Education Minister of Thailand even compiled into the middle school textbook a portion of the translated version of the novel. In many families of Thailand, children were required to read *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* at an early age.

From the historical and cultural background of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*' introduction into Thailand and its afterward consequences, one can see that the spread and influence of this Chinese classic novel is not just a pure literary phenomenon, but a cultural one containing much wider ramifications. *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* was exported to Thailand as a literary text of the Chinese classic novel, but its reception by the Thai dynasty went far beyond narrowly aesthetic considerations. The book was meant as a sort of reference text on a wide range of practical subjects such as military affairs, political diplomacy and ethics. It was used with the purpose of internalizing those paradigms in the business of construction and consolidation of

their own country. This is what makes *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* acquire “exceeding influence” in Thailand. That is, a literary work is read as texts of all sorts (military, diplomatic and ethic), and produces a much wider impact upon the society. So, when we examine the influence and dissemination of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* in Thailand, we need to adopt an open perspective that should not be confined within the scope of literature.

The spread of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* in Thailand over the past two centuries has taken the following trajectory. First, it made its way into the court and the court minister took the charge of the translation with the advocating of the King. Next, a hand-copied version was produced and circulated inside and outside the court. Then, it went into the life of common people through various art forms. This movement from the top to the bottom constitutes a unique “court model” of cultural influence.

In the history of human civilization, a process of “cultural filtering” often exists in the fusion of two cultures. A specific culture always selects what it needs from a different one with which it encounters. The choice is usually made in accordance with the particular needs of the “receptor” which vary historically, socially and culturally. Rama the First issued an imperial order to translate *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* at the beginning of the last century because the Bangkok dynasty was embarking upon the nation's construction after years of turmoil. The novel, according to Rama the Second, the successor of Rama the First, was “useful to the nation's public administration”. As it was known, *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* is about things happened in the period of Three Kingdoms in Chinese history (A.D. 220 – 265). The novel, also called “history of the rise and fall” of the Three Kingdoms, depicts the political, diplomatic and military conflicts between the three kingdoms of Shu, Wei and Wu. The narration begins with Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei's brotherhood alliance in the Peach Garden, and ends up with the subjection of the three kingdoms to the Jing (the Dynasty between 265 – 420). In the novel, the conflicts between Shu and Wei constitute the main plot,

while the conflicts between Wu and Shu, or Wu and Wei is of a subordinate order. The work also describes numerous subtle and complicated court intrigues within each individual kingdom. Through various kinds of incidents, the author is able to exhibit the vivid experience of political struggle and wisdom of the characters involved. Taken as a whole, *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* could be viewed as a war story whose basic plots are built upon wars and battle. The narration is presented through the conflicts between several feudal ruling cliques during the end of the Han dynasty. It tells of intriguing competitions in strength, wisdom and courage between various characters, especially through the demonstration of their ability to maneuver troops so as to take the enemy unawares in the war. In the past, Chinese military strategists and leaders of peasant uprising were all very familiar with this book because they could learn from it the necessary war strategies and tactics for their practical use. In history, Thailand was invaded by Burma troops several times. As soon as the Bangkok dynasty was founded, with the purpose of consolidating the frontier and particularly resting against invasions from Burma, a meeting was convened before the King himself to examine the strategic deployment against Burma troops. The foremost intention of his order to translate *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* at that particular juncture was to use it as a textbook on military affairs. The evidence of this can be found in the "Preface" to the complete translation of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* by the Thai writer Wan Na Wa.^⑩

In the history of Chinese literature, *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*, *Outlaws of the Marsh* and *Pilgrimage to the West* were three masterpieces of the Chinese classic novel. Based upon the stories that had already been widespread among the masses for a long time, all these novels took their final shapes in hands of intellectuals. The stories of the Three Kingdoms and Water Margins were history talking materials in the Song dynasty,^⑪ while the stories of Journey to the West were employed for Buddhist story-telling scripts. The three literary works all possess a strong heroic color and each has its own artistic merits. Since considerable number of people among the top rank of

the Bangkok court could read the Chinese novels in the original, their understanding about the Chinese literature, unlike that of the Europeans who usually had to resort to second-hand materials, was born out of immediate perception and communication. They had equal access to all three masterpieces, but why Rama the First and his court officials were specifically enamored of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*? Here lies the issue of cultural “filtering” and selection. Among various factors that made stories about the Three Kingdoms so popular was the orthodox concept of “supporting Liu and opposing Cao”. In the book “loyalty and righteousness” is attributed to the Shu Kingdom on the premise that they “save those in straits and help those in difficulty”, and “perform great feats to requite the country and pacify the people”. The novel puts “righteousness” at the top of “the Five Moral Principles” as the loftiest ethical achievement, and the episode concerning Liu, Guan and Zhang’s “getting into a brotherhood alliance for a common ideal of upholding justice in the world” is very touching indeed. Liu Bei, head of the Shu Kingdom, is portrayed as an ideal emperor, true to his oath of the Peach Garden alliance and having the good personality of “a benevolent king”, who earnestly seeks for talents among the folk and knows how to make a good use of their expertise. Zhu Geliang, devoted and virtuous Prime Minister, is an outstanding politician and military affairs. He is extremely faithful to the Shu court by “giving his all to the service of the kingdom” and therefore becomes an embodiment of loyalty and wisdom. Guan Yu, an invincible general under Liu Bei, is a hero of martial prowess. His spiritual world is full of lofty feelings, and thus typifies the author’s ideal of loyalty and righteousness. All of this could be advantageously appropriated by Rama the First, who was trying hard to strengthen the royal power and to put the country in good order. Contrary to the orthodox concepts expressed in *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*, novels of *Outlaws of the Marsh* and *Pilgrimage to the West* present in their different ways rebellious ideas against the royal court. This must have been the essential reason why the Bangkok dynasty chose, accepted and identified with *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*.

If we admit that the administrative needs of the ruling class is the real cause behind the circulation of the hand-written copy (produced in 1806) around the court and the subsequent Sino-Thai cultural fusion centering on “the craze for *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*” at the beginning of the 19th century. Then the following is meant to meet the aesthetic needs of the general readership: the successive printing of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*, the adaptation or imitation by various Thai poets and writers, and the recreation of its essence in poetry and drama and the publication of the complete translation. There is a process of change, which moved from “a court model” of official “absorption” to “a folk pattern” of unofficial reception. Under normal circumstances, the spread of a literary text depends on its own aesthetic values. It suits the aesthetic need of a new readership in the target culture. For instance, the acceptance of ancient Chinese drama and puppet-show by the Thai audience in the earlier period was aesthetically motivated, and those forms of Chinese art were popular among the masses for entertaining purpose. Although the factor of aesthetic consideration of a literary text also played its role in the spread of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* at the early stage, the most important motivation from the royal promoter lay in practical utility for state administration. Here, the interest in the book went beyond the limit of a literary text itself. The novel was actually read as a non-literary text. Its function was obviously utilitarian and its spread consciously organized by those at the top. This was different from the model of unofficial dissemination where the only motivation was entertainment. By the time of Rama the Fourth (1815 - 1868), situation at home and abroad had changed so much that the primary attention of the court went to the internal social reforms. The power for translating the Chinese classic novels formerly wielded by the kings was relegated to the hands of ministers. The purpose of translation also changed from satisfying the ruling-class’ needs for politics and military affairs to entertainment of the people. The translation department of the court was dissolved. From then on, *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* and other translated works of the Chinese classic novel became mere matters of

the masses. They were read by the majority as literary texts with a different reason and purpose from that of the earlier receivers in the court. The translation work also increasingly began to meet the needs of masses. Therefore, more and more classic Chinese novels with a great variety of subject matters were translated into the Thai language.

From the above discussion of the “court model” in which *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* was introduced into Thailand, we may conclude that, in the process of literary dissemination, literary texts may turn bigger than what they are and could be used as non-literary texts by certain receivers. For the excellence of a literary work lies in its very semantic elasticity, potential to different interpretations in all aspects. Given such an open space, when we re-consider or answer the question of what literature is and re-examine its function, we certainly should not confine ourselves to the dimension of the aesthetic, but open our mind to the larger world of history and culture.

Notes:

- ① From Kong Tai's *Sketches on Phnom*, quoted in *Shuijingzhu*, Volume One.
- ② *New Historical Records of the Yuan Dynasty*, Volume 255.
- ③ *Notes on the Western Regions of the Great Tong*, Volume 13.
- ④ Shkhotai, a kingdom mainly made up by the Thai nationality, is considered as “the cradle of the Thai civilization.”
- ⑤ *History of Thailand*, p. 36.
- ⑥ *Faithful Records of Ming Dynasty*, Hong Wu, Volume 150.
- ⑦ *The Continuous textual Research of Historical Literature*, Volume 47 *Research on Schools*.
- ⑧ *History of Thailand*, p. 145.
- ⑨ For information concerning the publication and reprinting of the translated version of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*, see *Chinese Literature in Thailand* by Wang Mianchang.
- ⑩ Among creative writings on *The Three Kingdoms* by writers in Thailand, the most popular is Ya Kau's *The Story - Telling Version of The Three Kingdoms*.
- ⑪ “Preface” to the 120 chapter translation of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*: “In Thailand, for many years, *The Three Kingdoms* were not only read by people as a popular literary work, but also studied as a book on war-crafts by soldiers and officers in the military force.”

- ⑫ “Preface” to the translation of *Outlaws of the Marsh*: “In the Rabbit Year, the Education Department of the National Defense Ministry issued an order for the translation of *Outlaws of the Marsh* with the intention that it be passed round among people for story – telling.”

About the author :

Rao Pengzi Professor for Ph. D. program of Comparative Arts Studies and Research Center for Comparative Poetics in the Chinese Department of Jinan University. Professor Rao is now Vice Director to China Art & Literary Theory Association and China Comparative Literature Association as well as directors of many local academic associations in Guangdong Province.

Publications include *An Introduction to Literature*, *Literature Criticism and Comparative Literature*, and *Mirror of the Artistically Inspired Soul* etc. She also supervised the publication of *A Comparative Course in Chinese And Western Drama* (to which she contributed the introduction and the first chapter) and a series of books under the general heading of *Traditional Literature and Contemporary Consciousness*.