

A Cultural Critique of Chinese Literary Classics: An In-Depth Analysis of Liu Zaifu's Study of The Romance of the Three Kingdoms and The Water Margin

Published: October 16, 2026 | Index ID: #931

In the vast landscape of world literature, few works possess the enduring cultural weight and sociopolitical influence of the Four Great Classic Novels of China. Among these, **The Romance of the Three Kingdoms** (*Sanguo Yanyi*) and **The Water Margin** (*Shuihu Zhuan*) stand as foundational pillars that have shaped the ethical, strategic, and psychological frameworks of the Sinophone world for centuries. However, traditional readings of these texts often stop at the level of historical dramatization or heroic celebration. In his seminal work, *A Study of Two Classics: A Cultural Critique of The Romance of the Three Kingdoms and The Water Margin*, renowned scholar **Liu Zaifu** (translated by Shu Yunzhong) provides a profound re-evaluation of these texts, examining them not merely as literature, but as the DNA of a collective cultural psychology.

This technical analysis explores Liu Zaifu's critique, focusing on the intersection of literary theory, cultural psychology, and Sinophone studies. We will dissect the mechanisms through which these narratives have influenced the Chinese national character, the structural hierarchies within the texts, and the broader implications for understanding Chinese identity in a globalized context.

The Theoretical Framework of Liu Zaifu's Cultural Critique

Liu Zaifu's approach to these classics is rooted in the concept of the **cultural-psychological structure**. This framework suggests that canonical literature acts as both a mirror and a blueprint for a society's values. Liu argues that while these novels represent the pinnacle of storytelling, they also encapsulate deep-seated cultural ailments that have persisted throughout history.

The Concept of 'Shuangdian Pipan' (Dual Classic Critique)

The core of Liu's thesis revolves around the **shuangdian pipan**, or the critique of the two classics. Unlike traditional literary criticism that focuses on aesthetic merit, Liu's critique is sociological and ethical. He posits that:

- The Romance of the Three Kingdoms fosters a culture of stratagem and deceit, elevating political Machiavellianism above humanistic values.
- The Water Margin glorifies structural violence and banditry, normalizing the subversion of law through brutal force and loyalty to a closed fraternity.

Sinophone Identity and Translation

As part of the *Cambria Sinophone World* series, this study also addresses the **Sinophone identity**—the diverse ways in which Chinese-language literature is produced and interpreted outside the mainland. The translation by **Shu Yunzhong** is critical here, as it bridges the gap between the traditional Chinese hermeneutic circle and Western academic discourse, allowing for a comparative analysis of how 'Chineseness' is constructed through these foundational myths.

Technical Breakdown: The Romance of the Three Kingdoms

The Romance of the Three Kingdoms is ostensibly a historical novel about the fall of the Han Dynasty and the

subsequent tripartite division of China. However, Liu Zaifu identifies it as a manual for **cunning (quanmou)**.

The Ethics of Stratagem

In the novel, the character of **Zhuge Liang** is transformed from a historical advisor into a supernatural embodiment of wisdom. Liu critiques this 'wisdom' as being inextricably linked to deception. The technical execution of the plot often relies on the **Three-Six Stratagems**, where the highest form of intelligence is defined by the ability to manipulate and destroy the 'other' through psychological warfare.

The Mechanism of Loyalty (Zhong) vs. Righteousness (Yi)

Liu analyzes the character **Guan Yu** as the archetype of **Yi**(Righteousness/Brotherhood). While Guan Yu is worshipped as a deity of loyalty, Liu points out the inherent danger in this framework: loyalty is often directed toward individuals (the lord or the brother) rather than principles of justice or the state. This creates a vertical power structure that prioritizes personal allegiance over social contract.

Technical Breakdown: The Water Margin

If *Three Kingdoms* is a study in political cunning, *The Water Margin* is an exploration of **primitive rebellion and collective violence**. Set in the Song Dynasty, it follows 108 outlaws who gather at Mount Liang (Liangshan).

The Aesthetics of Cruelty

Liu Zaifu highlights what he calls the 'culture of the bandit.' The novel's heroes, such as **Li Kui**, often engage in indiscriminate violence. The technical structure of the narrative rewards these acts as 'true expressions' of masculine vigor (*yanggang*). Liu's critique suggests that this has historically contributed to a societal tolerance for lawlessness provided it is framed as 'acting on behalf of Heaven' (*ti tian xing dao*).

The Trap of the 'Green Forest' Mentality

The **Lulin**(Green Forest) mentality describes a society where the only alternative to a corrupt state is a violent counter-culture. Liu argues that this binary prevents the development of a civil society, as the 'heroes' of the Water Margin are ultimately as authoritarian and hierarchical as the government they oppose.

Comparison Matrix: Three Kingdoms vs. Water Margin

To better understand the distinct yet complementary roles these novels play in Chinese culture, the following table compares their core technical and philosophical attributes.

Feature/Metric	The Romance of the Three Kingdoms	The Water Margin
Primary Cultural Driver	Political Cunning (Quanmou)	Heroic Violence (Baoli)
Central Archetype	The Strategist (Zhuge Liang)	The Outlaw (Song Jiang/Li Kui)
Model of Power	Legitimacy and Statehood	Brotherhood and Rebellion
Ethical Focus	Zhong (Loyalty to the Sovereign)	Yi (Loyalty to the Fraternity)
Impact on Society	Normalization of Deception	Normalization of Cruelty
Literary Style	Formal, Semi-Classical	Vernacular, Raw, Direct

The Global Transmediation of the Classics

The technical reach of these novels extends far beyond the printed page. As noted in contemporary Sinophone studies, these stories have been adapted into numerous formats, creating a **multimedia intertextuality**.

Case Study: Video Games and Cinema

The **Dynasty Warriors** video game series and John Woo's **Red Cliff** are prime examples of how the technical elements of *Three Kingdoms*—strategy, character-based combat, and tactical positioning—have been quantified for a global audience. However, Liu Zaifu might argue that these adaptations often strip away the cultural critique, leaving behind a sanitized version of heroism that further reinforces the 'cult of the strategist.'

Case Study: The 'Water Margin' and the Gangster Genre

The tropes of *The Water Margin*—blood brothers, secret societies, and the code of the underworld—are the technical precursors to the modern Hong Kong 'triad' film genre. This illustrates the lasting power of the 'Green Forest' mentality in the Sinophone imagination, where the outlaw is the only legitimate moral agent in a broken world.

Methodological Guide: Conducting a Cultural Critique of Classical Texts

For researchers and students of literature, applying Liu Zaifu's methodology requires a shift from **internalist** to **externalist** criticism. Below is a procedural framework for conducting such an analysis.

Step 1: Deconstruction of Heroism

Identify the 'heroic' acts within the text and strip away the narrative justification. Ask: If these acts were performed by an antagonist, would they be considered crimes? This reveals the author's (and the culture's) moral biases.

Step 2: Analysis of Social Hierarchy

Map the relationships between characters. In *Three Kingdoms*, observe the vertical hierarchy of lords and vassals. In *Water Margin*, observe the exclusionary nature of the 108 stars. Analyze how these structures replicate or challenge state power.

Step 3: Cultural-Psychological Mapping

Trace the impact of specific narrative tropes on contemporary social behavior. For instance, how does the concept

of 'giving face' (mianzi) or 'stratagem' (ji) appear in modern business or political negotiations within the Sinophone world?

Challenges and Troubleshooting in Literary Analysis

Critiquing national 'sacred' texts is not without its difficulties. Scholars often face significant resistance when challenging traditional interpretations.

- The Trap of National Pride: Critics may be accused of being 'anti-tradition.' Solution: Frame the critique as an evolutionary step toward modernizing the culture's psychological self-awareness.
- Anachronistic Misalignment: Applying modern human rights standards to 14th-century texts can lead to skewed results. Solution: Focus on the continuity of the impact—how these texts are read and used today—rather than judging the historical authors by modern standards.
- Translation Loss: Concepts like Yi do not have direct English equivalents. Solution: Use multi-layered definitions that include terms like 'righteousness,' 'duty,' 'comradeship,' and 'sacrifice.'

The Theoretical Resonance: Gao Xingjian and Beyond

Liu Zaifu's work does not exist in a vacuum. It shares a deep resonance with other modern thinkers like **Gao Xingjian**, the Nobel laureate. Gao's focus on **individual aesthetics** and the 'fleeing' of the self from collective ideological traps mirrors Liu's critique of the collective unconsciousness found in the classics. Together, they represent a movement in Sinophone literature that seeks to liberate the Chinese individual from the 'shadows' of their own history.

The Role of Sinophone Series in Global Academia

The publication of this study by **Cambria Press** signifies a shift in how Chinese literature is taught. It moves away from 'Orientalist' fascinations with the exotic and toward a rigorous, technical examination of the ideological machinery driving one of the world's oldest continuous civilizations.

Summary of Cultural Implications

The study of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margin* through Liu Zaifu's critical lens reveals that literature is never 'just' a story. These classics are powerful instruments of social engineering that have historically prioritized the collective over the individual and the tactical over the ethical. By deconstructing the mechanisms of stratagem in *Three Kingdoms* and the normalization of violence in *Water Margin*, Liu Zaifu provides a necessary diagnostic tool for the Sinophone world.

For the global reader, this critique offers a sophisticated understanding of Chinese strategic thought and social behavior. It moves beyond the simplified 'Art of War' clichés and delves into the psychological complexities of a culture grappling with its own monumental legacy. As these stories continue to be adapted into films, games, and digital media, the need for a rigorous cultural critique becomes even more vital to ensure that the 'ailments' of the past are not coded into the technologies of the future.

Ultimately, Liu Zaifu's contribution to literary scholarship serves as a reminder that the greatest respect one can pay to a classic is to subject it to the most rigorous of critiques. Only by understanding the 'dual classics' can the Sinophone world—and the world at large—navigate the complex path toward a more humanistic and transparent cultural future.

Tags: #Liu Zaifu #Chinese Literature #Three Kingdoms #Water Margin #Sinophone Studies #Cultural Critique

