

# Three kingdoms, sense making and complexity theory

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Despite the wide, immense and continuous popularity of *Romance of Three Kingdoms* in China - as popular as *Art of War* by Sun Tzu - the work is by far less widely known in the West. Yet to the Chinese, Japanese and Korean CEOs in mastering strategy, *Three Kingdoms* is indispensable reading. *Three Kingdoms* acts as a bridge that links the present with the past. In interpreting global events, a CEO or Chinese leader often takes the novel as a mental schema or a grid. For example, whilst in the West a CEO may be said to be 'Theory X' type, a Chinese CEO is referenced to *Three Kingdoms* may be said to be 'Cao Cao'. Moreover many a top businessman from the 'chopstick' culture are able to weave a story from the *Romance of Three Kingdoms*. He may cite a word, phrase, line, dialogue or an entire episode to justify his intentions, remarks or actions taken in strategy. To function as a strategist in China, one has to go beyond the MBA and know the novel. Indeed, vignettes (despite 'Romance') are grounded in historical settings. As such, they are very much akin to edited down versions of Harvard MBA case studies. Many of these tales, illustrate how the *Art of War* principles may be applied in a specific organizational context. The most intriguing aspects in the storytelling of *Romance of Three Kingdoms* lies in their relevance for the Chinese in making sense of what is *still* happening. In this paper we cite the case of Taiwan as an illustration. Given the novel's emergence from a particularly chaotic era in Chinese history, their narratives are especially relevant for our times. The 21<sup>st</sup> century may be remembered as particularly troubling, terrorizing times: Tsunami, region wide earthquakes, killer viruses, Avian flu... and what else?

## Introduction

In this, a first work of its kind, the author explains the relevance of an ancient yet highly popular Chinese romantic saga for modern day, sense-making. To make good sense of a world where a reigning superpower is seized by phobia is not easy. Besides human terrorizing, there are impending threats by Mother Nature: 'Tsunami' scale tidal waves, region-wide Pakistan-Kashmir earthquakes

and killer viruses. As I write this paper precautions are being taken in Singapore to counter the threat of a population wipeout from Avian flu. The concurrence of these events is bound to compound the difficulties any society has in coping. Moreover, even without these threats, our current global economic environment is chaotic, complex, and is intensely competitive. Yet such a world is not altogether removed from the Chinese historical period of the *Three Kingdoms*.

One possible reason why the Chinese continue to be making sustained enormous leaps is that they are not unfamiliar in living through such environments. Through the *Romance of Three Kingdoms*, most Chinese kids grow up hearing about and learning the many case-stories, vignettes, intrigues, tales, schemes, stratagems - all set in a period of wars, turbulence and chaos. Unsurprisingly therefore, as grown-ups the Chinese continue to view the world through the lens of the *Romance of Three Kingdoms*. Here, we cite from a biography of Mao Tsu Tung a specific example. The documentation of Mao's life provides an excellent case in how the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* may color if not shape a Chinese person in his thinking; this is reason enough to read the historical novel.

The *Romance of Three Kingdoms* has another role and it is in sensemaking for the Chinese. We cite the yet to be resolved issue of Taiwan. In the process, grand vistas implicit and underlying the entire *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* are conveyed via visual imageries; such imageries are grounded in complexity literature. The technique of imagery is employed too to convey visually deeply rooted Chinese concepts like, for example, a kingdom. Unlike the English language, Chinese as a means for communication has its roots in pictographs. Or to put it another way: Chinese language is but a series of pictures strung together. In other words Chinese thinking is embedded in the Chinese characters that evolved from pictographs. Chinese thought and her language are inseparable. Harold Morowitz (2002) admits such an interest in his recent work, *Emergence of Everything*:

“I am struck by the extent to which I have focused on Western Science ... and ignored the thought of the Orient...”

Here is where the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* as an emergent, historical novel is particularly relevant, for its ‘fractal-like’ pages - to borrow from complexity - emerged out of chaos (Gleick, 1987). The *Three Kingdoms* being a warring, chaotic period and thus is as relevant to chaos theory as *E:CO* as a journal is to complexity. Insights on organizing in chaos, for instance, are buried within its pages. Next we explore the origin of the historical novel; how the many tales about personalities are wrought out of the period of *Three Kingdoms*. And that these stories later emerged and merged into chapters of the *Romance of Three Kingdoms*.

### Emergence of a Romance

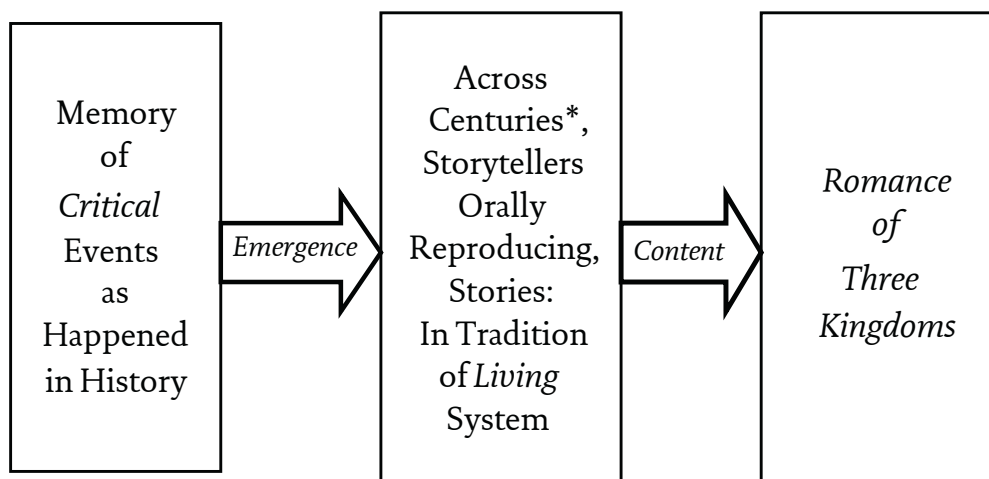
In the early 14<sup>th</sup> century a male novelist - and more importantly a dramatist as well - a Mr. Luo Guanzhong, began the process of piecing together these stories. Up until that time, these narratives had been transmitted orally. His efforts resulted in this massive historical novel, one that spanned 120 chapters. These are accounts, tales, stories and anecdotes that are often enacted into dramas - such is the captive power of the narratives that flow out of this warring, chaotic period of Chinese history known simply as *Three Kingdoms*.

Since the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* is not one written by Luo Guanzhong, but is more a compilation by him, it does not read like a typical Western novel. Yet these are interesting stories as they were tales told time and time again by professional storytellers to entertain farmers. This happened probably

sporadically across many rice-fields in agricultural China. Imagine these events being held under rather picturesque scenarios: glittering moonlight with a night sky littered by twinkling stars. There is little wonder why these stories persisted down the centuries through such retellings.

More by a process of natural evolution and selection, and much less by design, the tales of *Three Kingdoms* are transformed into dramatic (implied by *Yan Yi* in the title) works. The self-emergence of the stories now neatly collected as the *A Romance of Three Kingdoms* is by itself an intriguing social phenomenon (see Figure 1). The sources of these stories are the collective consciousnesses of the Chinese people - stories of events that happened during *Three Kingdoms*. This is a classic example in the tradition of a living system: stories reproduced (‘replication’ in the language of complexity theory) by hundreds if not thousands, or ‘tens of thousands’ (which in Chinese usage means too many to be counted) of storytellers. Mr. Luo Guanzhong’s contribution was to crystallize these tales into the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* that takes on the structure of a historical novel.

Many of these stories are laced with deep moral principles. Eventually some episodes were translated into operatic works. Brewitt-Taylor (Guanzhong, 2005) rendered the work into English as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Chinese: *San Guo - Three Kingdoms - Yan Yi - romance*, or more accurately, theatrical works). Clearly, by any scale of comparison, the work is monumental: more than 1,000 characters spread across more than a century, 113 years: CE 168 to CE 280. Moss Roberts, in a later translation, decided on dropping ‘*Romance*’



**Figure 1** A model of the self-emergence of stories (\*Roughly 10 centuries from the end of the *Three Kingdoms*, AD 280 before Luo Guanzhong’s written novel)

for the word implied a world that is ‘...removed from reality...’ (Guanzhong, 1994: 1463). The version translated by Moss Roberts was published by Beijing’s Foreign Language Press and resulted in an additional volume (altogether three volumes) and includes appended notes numbering 1690 pages. Next we explain why the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* may be said to be a ‘chaos’ story.

## Signs of Chaos

The novel begins as China crosses into the ‘edge of chaos’; a time when the centralized bureaucracy was being dismantled: bureaus, institutions and offices, institutionalized by the glorious Han emperors of the past for the preservation of social order and peace. Indeed in the very first chapter there were already Heavenly signs of the impending disintegration of empire. For the purpose of illustrating the imagery of chaos, just two examples are highlighted.

### Earthquake

Traditionally the Chinese have always regarded this as an ominous event; that it heralds a change in top leadership, especially the emperor. Even in recent times, the death for example of Mao was heralded by earthquakes in China. The Chinese, as they had done for generations, interpreted the happenings as a portent of change. Similarly the imminent decline of the imperial house of Han is vividly, though metaphorically implied, for example: parts of a cliff from the Yuan Mountain were collapsing into the earth - Louyang, the then capital of the empire, was badly hit by an earthquake.

On October 8<sup>th</sup> 2005, a 6.6 magnitude earthquake hit Pakistan and Kashmir and it caused utter devastation with resulting panic. Thousands were reported to have been killed. Although there was no measure of the magnitude of earthquake in the historical Louyang story, the reader may imagine the kind of chaos that resulted.

### Tidal waves

In the novel there is a line that describes briefly tidal waves so powerful as to draw coastal villagers out to the sea. Given Hurricane Katrina, the US reader can easily picture the chaos; similarly for Asians who witnessed the impacts of the recent Tsunami, so vast was the scale of damage for the coastal regions of Asia, including India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Thailand.

Besides these two signs, which have recent parallels, there were others that required some imagi-

nation on the part of the reader. These include the appearance of a green serpent coiling round the imperial chair. Upon its disappearance, a thunderstorm reigned. Then hailstones pelted down from open sky upon dwellings. Again, imagine the chaos. Then, what is clearly unnatural or supernatural, hens transforming into roosters. These signs are described in Chapter 1 to mark the beginning of a period of chaos within the ancient Middle Kingdom or China.

## A Chaos Story

Corresponding with these happenings, in Chapter 1 the rebellion by Yellow Scarves was raised. This is a clear indication of weakness at the center of power, the Imperial House. The root of the problem was in the rule of a ‘child’ emperors. Too young to rule, they became targets of political manipulation.

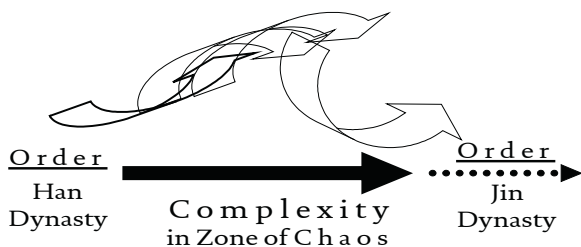
Every power broker saw this as a golden opportunity to install their choice of child emperor. The relentless internal power struggles within the Imperial Palace are marked by plots, intrigues, schemes and ploys. What’s more, the eunuchs too are after the spoils. They murdered General He Jin in cold blood by tricking him. This led to the return of General Dong Zhuo riding on the glory of squashing the rebellion. Thus began the phase where ostensibly, power lay in the hands of a Han descendant, the real power vests in another, beginning with Dong Zhuo. Thus within the early chapters of the novel, there is a gradual phasing-in of a period of chaos.

Given the usurpation of imperial power by Dong Zhou outside the capital, an alliance was in the making. There, forces gathered in order to free the Han imperial house from grasp of Dong Zhuo. Dong Zhuo was finally disposed off, but it was not through pitched battles rather by an intriguing strategy. Out of the episodes involving Dong Zhuo alone, there are several intrigues. For example, there is the illustration of the role of indirect strategy. A peerless beauty, Diaochan, a singing girl, is utilized to drive a wedge between Dong Zhuo and his invincible General Lu Bu. For with Lu Bu, his foremost general by his side, Dong Zhuo is simply impossible to defeat on the battlefield. By chapter 10 however, the demise of Dong Zhuo is described most vividly: fragments of his corpse absorbed by lightning.

Following Dong Zhuo there is Cao Cao, a major character who was much admired by Mao Tsu Tung. Initially Cao Cao tried to pretend he was acting under an imperial mandate to reintegrate the empire. Moss Roberts puts attempts in re-centralization as

being ‘documented’ from chapters 38 to 50. In these chapters Cao Cao still kept up the façade of acting under the order of Han imperial house. After his defeat at the Battle of Red Cliffs, Cao Cao no longer kept up with these pretenses. Thus we have by then the seeds of the beginning of the *Three Kingdoms*: Wei in the north, Shu Han in the west and Wu in the south.

So the beginning of a disunited China as there were now three disparate centers, with each vying for ultimate central power. Indeed, the first syllable of ‘Zhong’ Guo (*pinyin*) in Chinese means ‘central’. Nothing can be more chaotic than an extended period of continuous warfare. Indeed this struggle for power is a central theme of the historical novel; a theme cutting across altogether 1,261 pages in Brewitt-Taylor’s English translated version (Guanzhong, 2005). Initially, due to the power struggles in the Inner Palace, one child Han Emperor is replaced after another. Figure 2 depicts this through the visual imagery of complexity theory - there is an almost invisible ‘bifurcation’. This is the sense of splitting up: the struggle between the ostensibly pro-Han but secretly, only using Han as a cover, and the loyal, pro-Han dynasty camps. As described, Dong Zhuo did this and following Cao Cao.



**Figure 2** Complexity existing in the edge (zone) of chaos

The historical novel ends when order is restored with China reunited through the centralization of power in new Jin dynasty. As is implicit in the word chaos, there is a surprising twist to the outcome. For in the grand finale none of the descendants of the original founders of the three kingdoms - Wei, Shu Han or Wu - prevailed. Yet it is one that is consistent with the Chinese worldview.

### How does this happen?

Cao Cao, although in imperial service, had set up his own Wei dynasty. In the process he had thus usurped power. As he does to others, so do others do to him. One of the descendants of his field marshal, Sima Yi, did exactly that to the Wei dynasty. Indeed

Sima Yan, the founding emperor of Jin dynasty, said to Cao Huan:

“In so doing, I am avenging on behalf of the House of Han” (Chapter 119).

Besides power struggles, within these pages are recorded narratives giving insights in human behavior. Next we shall discuss the continuing relevance of this novel in the context of modern society.

### Relevance of *Three Kingdoms*

The *Romance of Three Kingdoms* as a saga continues to help Chinese make sense of the world. And as we discussed earlier, it is a world changing to be increasingly unpredictable and complex. For non-Chinese there is even greater value from reading the historical novel. For by doing so, foreigner get a better grasp of the consciousness of the Chinese, such as insights into how the ordinary Chinese mind often perceives, frames and thinks about global issues.

The *Three Kingdoms* remains massively popular among the Chinese whether a reader is young, middle-aged or old. There is also the popular dramatization of the tales in the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* by Central China Television (CCTV). It took four years of enormous efforts to dramatize the novel. The final product packaged as a collection of 54 video discs (VCD) is structured into 84 episodes. Yet, as reviewed by this author, it is still inadequate. For despite tremendous efforts by CCTV, there remained parts of the *Three Kingdoms* that are left largely untouched. The availability of televised serials adds the popularity of the novel.

Strictly speaking, there is no an exact equivalent of such a work in either of the Western or Indian streams of literature. The Indian *Mahabharata*, originally in Sanskrit, is by comparison a deeply religious, divinely inspired text. The classical work involves Gods and underpins Hindu beliefs. My brief experience of India tells me that for the Indians, the *Mahabharata* does not feature strongly in their external, organizational worldview. This is not surprising for whilst *Three Kingdoms* is about events that happened in the human world, *Mahabharata* is concerned with life as led by divinities. This is not to deny the immense value of reading *Mahabharata* to appreciate the Indian mindset.

Perhaps an analogously closer collection is in the works by the British playwright William Shake-

speare (especially dramatic works involving tragedy and history). For like *Three Kingdoms* in the oriental East, the works of Shakespeare are often cited by Westerners in conversation to, for example, reinforce an insight or observation made about modern human society and behavior. In dialogue, an Englishman may see a modern love affair as a case of 'Romeo and Juliet'. Or in a passing comment, a Scot may remark with glee that the lender is "...asking for his pound of flesh..." (i.e., Merchant of Venice). Such remarks will strike a chord with Westerners who are already familiar with Shakespearean dramatic works.

Moss Roberts (Guanzhong, 1994: 1459) drew an even more interesting parallel between the *Three Kingdoms* and Shakespeare's works (specifically, Richard II and III). The *Three Kingdoms* cast a 'mythic' status to that historical era. This is much like what Shakespearean works have done to the years between CE 1377 to 1455 for Westerners. Even so, the historical novel is definitely *not* a mythology: *Romance of Three Kingdoms* is most useful, if not necessary reading for anyone who wishes to work, live and succeed in China. For the minds of many a mainland Chinese are still deeply influenced by the historical novel. This is what we shall turn to next.

### Mao Tsu Tung

Anyone who had been to China will readily agree, Mao Tsu Tung (*Zedong*, pinyin) remained very much admired as the founding father of modern China. He is her foremost strategic thinker. Indeed in the eyes of farming communities, Mao's prestige has reached mythic status: some even worship him as a Deity. No lesser an authority than Mao had cited the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* as a most useful work. In particular, as observed by Ross Terrill in *Mao: A Biography*, that at a young age:

"Zedong ... read banned books at their little wooden desks ... they were tales of war and banditry... Romance of Three Kingdoms ... did more than anything else ... to color Zedong's mental world..." (Terrill, 1980: 8).

This crucial role of *Romance of Three Kingdoms* in shaping the mindset of Mao Tsu Tung is further reinforced by this observation:

"Zedong arose to pack his personal things... At one end was a bundle containing tunics... The other end supported a basket reserved for Story of the Marshes and Romance of Three Kingdoms..." (p. 15).

Evidence of the depth of internalization of *Romance of Three Kingdoms* into the soul, mind and

heart of Mao Tsu Tung is even better illustrated by yet another incident as recorded in the same biography:

"Pupils came to respect Mao's grasp of Romance of the Three Kingdoms... [T]hey liked to listen to his retelling [author's emphasis] of their best episodes..." (p. 21).

In other words, Mao had developed himself, even at an early age, into a narrator of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. By the age of 26, Mao had been said to even model himself after the Three Heroes: Liu Bei, Zhang Fei and Guan Yu. This is put across in the biography as follows:

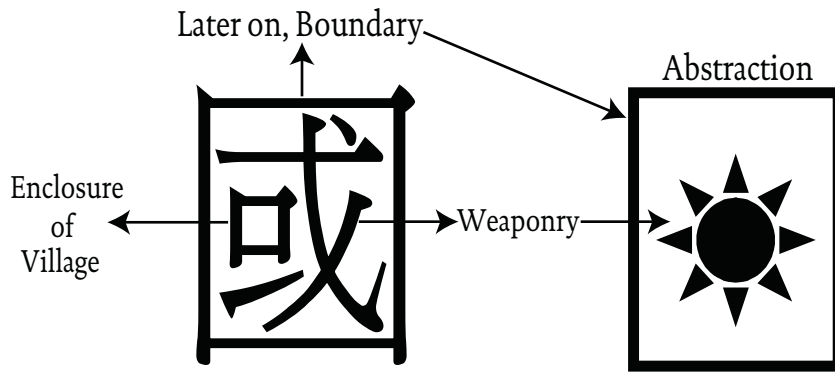
"In Romance of the Three Kingdoms there are Three Heroes. Mao and two other students of Professor Yang modeled themselves on the same idea (san ge hao jie)..." (p. 37).

Mao is just one example of possibly millions of other Chinese people who grew up deeply influenced by the novel. Step into a typical Chinese bookshop and you find something about the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* on the shelves. Different publishers often bring out different adaptations of the historical novel - there are many abridged versions, with some using cartoon illustrations, and there are also works focusing on specific episodes. As such one may expect the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* to have some role in a society of 1.3 billion Chinese. Clearly it is not just an entertaining historical novel. Here we argue for the possibility of the novel for sensemaking. In the next section we shall use a specific and very topical issue - conflict over the status of Taiwan - to illustrate just how *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* may color perceptions and anticipations of the Chinese people.

### Sensemaking: Case of Taiwan

The modern practical relevance of *Romance of Three Kingdoms* is in its contributions to Chinese sensemaking; that it provides a mental model, or schema, for interpreting the highly competitive, changing modern world. Let us for discussion take, as an example of how *Romance of Three Kingdoms* may color the thinking of the Chinese, the current issue of pro-independence Taiwan.

Uppermost in the minds of elderly Chinese people is in the eventual reintegration of Taiwan, now separated with mainland China. There is an underlying, very popular doctrine often quoted by the Chinese from the novel: that our human society has



**Figure 3** Concept of 'kingdom'

a tendency to move from order to disorder and then again back to order. Few Western scholars realize how deeply ingrained in Chinese beliefs such global order lies which is embedded in just two lines of the *Romance of Three Kingdoms*. These lines are often cited by the Chinese in conversations in justifying their observations. One line is right at the beginning, introducing the seeds of chaos or beginning of disorder. The other line is right at the closing of the novel and heralds an end to the period of chaos, or beginning of order.

[Beginning] The world under heaven, after a long period of division, tends to unite; after a long period of union, tends to divide.

[Ending] That is the world under heaven, after a long period of union, tends to divide; after a long period of division, tends to unite.

If Western strategists had deeply reflected upon just these lines, as well as taking a page or two from perspectives of complexity theory, they might realize why, for the masses of Chinese people, there can only be a deep sense of everlasting peace if Taiwan is reunified with mainland China. This also accounts for why 1.2 billion mainland Chinese see war as a justifiable alternative if Taiwanese threaten independence.

In some Chinese minds, the reunification of Taiwan will read for them like the closing chapter or line of the *Three Kingdoms*. Taiwan, like Hong Kong, had since time immemorial been part of the Middle Kingdom. The mainland Chinese are developing policies for reintegrating Taiwan economically. So that *de facto* Taiwan is economically an integral part of mainland *Zhong Guo* (pinyin, China). Ordinary Chinese, in interpreting the prevailing scenario in Taiwan, is likely to subconsciously draw a parallel. For just like the historical novel, the history about

modern China cannot yet be said to be closed. Why? Taking *Three Kingdoms* as an antecedent, the story can only close when Taiwan is back in the fold of the Motherland - in other words, a truly *Zhong Guo* (meaning Central Kingdom) with power centralized in Beijing. This will be much better appreciated if the reader also grasps the very ancient Chinese concept of 'Kingdom' (or *Guo*) as implied, not by just a word, but also by its pictograph. Accordingly, in the next section we elaborate further on 'Kingdom', a concept so fundamental to the historical novel. Moreover it is also part of its title, as it is a *Romance* about *Three Kingdoms*!

### Concept of 'Kingdom'

In contrast to the United States and even Europe, China is a very ancient civilization. The original *Three Kingdoms*, before its 'codification' in writing, existed only as oral tales. Despite modern television, the story remains popular among Chinese farming communities in its traditional, oral renderings. Unlike the other Chinese minorities, like the Mongols or Tibetans for example, for the Han civilization writing had been around for a much longer time and evolving through continuous usage. As such, for many Chinese characters, a scholar may trace the origins of a concept from analysis of its pictographic form. Thus, unlike the alphabetic system of Western languages, Chinese language being pictographic, an analysis of its visual imagery yields a deeper understanding. It is often an intellectually rewarding exercise. Any person who is able to read Chinese characters may decode from the Chinese word (or character) for kingdom (*guo*) these fundamental concepts.

What then is fundamental in the Chinese conceptualization of a Kingdom? Initially, in the very early formulations, it is a symbol of weaponry besides a village: one within a protective enclosure (see the square in Figure 3). To the north (upper)

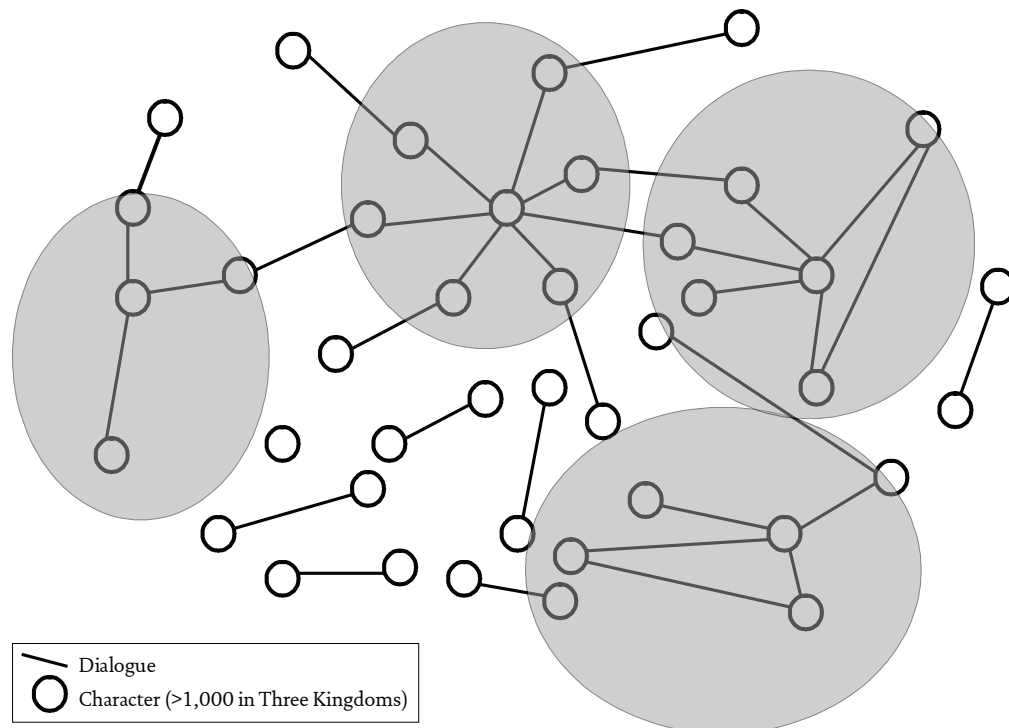
and south (lower) of this square defensive barriers are added. Later with the passage of time and as mainland China became more intensely populated, there arose an autopoietic re-conceptualization in organizing. It marks the beginning, conceptually speaking, of the concept of what constitutes a kingdom. The addition of a rectangular border fosters structure, a broader conceptualization within the same Chinese character. Most relevantly for us in this discussion, the rectangular border defines the space (more in Maturana & Varela's, 1980, sense; see also Luhmann, 1990) of an autopoietic (autonomous, self-contained, co-production, creative as well destructive, system) system or a 'Kingdom'. This leads us to another critical related aspect of the *Three Kingdoms* within the terms of complexity theory: interactions as dialogues resulting from the emergence of complex networks.

### Dialogues as interactions

In complexity theory, concepts such as 'inter-connectivity' or 'inter-actionist processes' are emphasized as part of the natural order. The question that ought to be asked is: metaphorically, how can that possibly be made evident in the *Romance of Three Kingdoms*? Supposing, a researcher wishes to 'model' the *Three Kingdoms* for this dimension, or facet, or perspective, to complexity theory; what should he or she be looking for in such an analysis? The answer is in the dialogues, and there are many within the historical romance.

Figure 4 illustrates the possible patterns of dialogues with a circle representing a person and a line, an interactive, connecting dialogue. Often-times, one finds that there is not a dialogue (conversation between two persons) but many conversations among a gathering of people, usually over dinner. Indeed, in reading the storylines of *Three Kingdoms*, many plots, stratagems, tricks, intrigues, strategies, ploys and counter-ploys are hinted, implied, explored, raised and hatched over wine and food. Analyses of such dialogues provide a very rich insight into the essence of Chinese strategic thinking and behavior. Given such insights into strategic behavior for coping in times of chaos, it is hardly surprising that this novel is often compulsory reading material for any Japanese executive on being promoted to senior management (e.g., Sanyo Corporation, see Tung, 1994).

Most intriguing are the vignettes inside the pages of the historical novel. For these reflect in essence the very complex nature in the patterning of human interactions (much like Capra's, 1996, 'web of life' only more intricate than can possibly be imagined) and how the different components within the mega-stem vie for power. Thus each of these chapters is often well-laced with intrigues, tricks, stratagems, plans, bluffs, regrets, whispers and more; stories that provide insights into human behavior in their vying for political and military power.



**Figure 4** Dialogues leading to an emerging catalytic, complex network

These stories when they are interlaced together provide us a most powerful evocation; one of how complex indeed the Chinese society is - or any society - during a time of the utter chaos wrought by war. Even more intriguingly, these narratives have some historical basis, or at least may be put into a historical, socially determinable context. Put together the more than 1,000 pages of flowing Chinese characters depicting what a mega-social 'complex adaptive system' at work is like. Probably, very few novels may rival the *Three Kingdoms* for insights to complexity theory. The big story ends when chaos subsides as China returns under the control of one emperor with the rise of Jin dynasty.

In so doing the author hopes to provide some answers as to, what Kauffman (1993) had queried in his *Origins of Order*, the role of chaos in the living systems. And moreover since as argued in Valera, *et al.* (1991) that the "...inner world is intimately linked to language," the impact of chaos (at a time of war or severe, cut-throat competition) on the very nature of story telling! It must always be remembered, the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* is first and foremost an *oral* epic. Such dialogues unveil - as does in the real world - insights to the key personalities.

Next we shall, by citing particular dialogues, or feature a lack of them, unveil the characters of two key, historical figures who were Emperors.

## Typology of leaders

### Cao Cao

The personality of a leader for example is often reflected in their dialogue. One of the most famous one liners attributed to Cao Cao as yielding insights to his cunning ruthlessness was:

*"It is better for me to wrong the world than it is for the world to be wronging me."*

These words were spoken by Cao Cao when he slaughtered the innocent Lu Boshe, a sworn brother of his own father. Lu Boshe, despite knowing that Cao Cao was on the run, had offered to host him for the night. The detail of the story may be read on page 55 of Robert's translation in *Three Kingdoms*.

The ruthlessness of Cao Cao was echoed in the monologue of Chen Gong. He was once a magistrate who spared Cao Cao. He then vacated his post so as to follow him as a leader. Upon seeing Lu Boshe innocently being slaughtered, he then remarked to himself:

*"Cao Cao I had treated him as a good man. To join him I had abandoned my post as magistrate. Now I see he had heart of a beast..."*

Another example of a revealing dialogue about Cao Cao is when he acts ostensibly as Prime Minister serving under Han Emperor. In reality, behind the scene he wields absolute power. In that role Cao Cao is trying to coerce the mother to get Shan Fu, a noted strategist, to serve him. At that time Shan Fu was serving Liu Bei. Cao Cao's ploy was to get her, as his mother, to denounce her son for serving Liu Bei. He cast aspersions on Liu Bei with these words:

*"He makes false claims of being an Imperial Uncle. He has no credibility nor is he committed to any righteous course. Appearing and acting nobly but in reality he is a coarse man..."*

It is in the severe retort of this woman, a Madame Xu, that the darker side of Cao Cao's personality is revealed. She immediately reaffirmed Liu Bei as the true blood descendant of the imperial family by specifying his genealogy; that Liu Bei's ancestor is Prince Jing of Zhong Shan, the great-great-grandson of Emperor Jing. She then 'scolded' Cao Cao with this mouthful:

*"Even though you appear in the guise of Prime Minister serving under the imperial house, you are in truth nothing but a traitor. Now you deliberately make Liu Bei out to be disobedient Han citizen. Now you want me to persuade my son to serve under you, the dark, evil side..."*

And for the Chinese her most biting remark of all is in blasting at Prime Minister Cao Cao, these few words: "Have you no sense of shame?"

Why? For the Chinese what differentiates a human being from animals is in our innate sense of shame. It is the height of insult for Cao Cao to be scolded as a 'shameless' creature. In that same breath, she praised his adversary Liu Bei for his humanity. For more detailed reading, refer to pages 428-429, again of Moss' translation (Guanzhong, 1994).

### Sun Quan

The personality of Sun Quan is however unveiled more through his reticence. Sun Quan's style of leadership may come across as being indecisive. Yet he may be seen by other readers as highly consultative. As a leader, he rarely speaks his mind but rather has a tendency to seek out and hear out the views of others. Take for example just two pages out of the 43<sup>rd</sup>

chapter in *Romance of Three Kingdoms* (Guanzhong, 1994: 505-506) on descriptions about his actions:

“Sun Quan was already in council with his officers and officials...”

After having read a letter from Cao Cao presented to him, he was asked,

“What is your most honored view, my lord?”

And in a response typical of him as a leader in decision making:

“A decision has yet to be reached...”

Even though his counselors had proclaimed the view of his adviser, Zhang Zhao as being one that:

“...conform to the wishes of Heaven itself...”

He himself as the Lord simply “pondered in silence...” And, “said nothing.”

Then taking the opportunity of going to the privy, Sun Quan asked Lu Su,

“But what is your mind on that?”

Yet his style of leadership is admired by the Japanese, who are equally avid readers of *Romance of Three Kingdoms*. During the author’s stay in Japan - as Singapore-Japan Government Fellow at the Japan Productivity Center, Tokyo - the distinct impression he obtained was intriguing. The Japanese regarded the leadership style of Sun Quan as being most appropriate and he was most admired by the Japanese.

On reflection, this is not too surprising. The Japanese themselves practice a highly consultative, consensus building style of decision-making.

Statistical analysis of occurrences of names of these two leaders within the pages of the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* further reinforced these views (see Figure 5). The low key, quiet, consultative approach of Sun Quan is reflected in his low scores. The assertive, vocal and cunning Cao Cao has the most number of counts throughout the novel. Finally the humane, caring, brotherly, gentlemanly and man-of-honor Liu Bei lies in between both Sun Quan and Cao Cao.

In a short paper like this it is impossible to do justice the central place that the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* has among chopstick wielding societies: China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam and millions of overseas Chinese living in Asia. As such, in the concluding section some comments are made on other works and also on possibilities for further research.

### Other Works and Further Research

Given the enormous impact that China is very likely to have on the future of global economy, it is necessary for non-Chinese to gain a deeper appreciation of the processes of Chinese mind. One of the most effective approaches is to read key, and highly popular, Chinese novels including *Journey to the West*, *All Men are Brothers* (“*Water Margin*”) and even *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Or even better still to contemplate on *Tao Te Ching*, a classical work by Lao Tzu, or to probe deeply into the meanings of *I Ching*, often referred to as a “*Book on change*.” For what is embodied in Buddhism, especially Mahayana school too are relevant for giving insights to the Chinese mind. Such works are

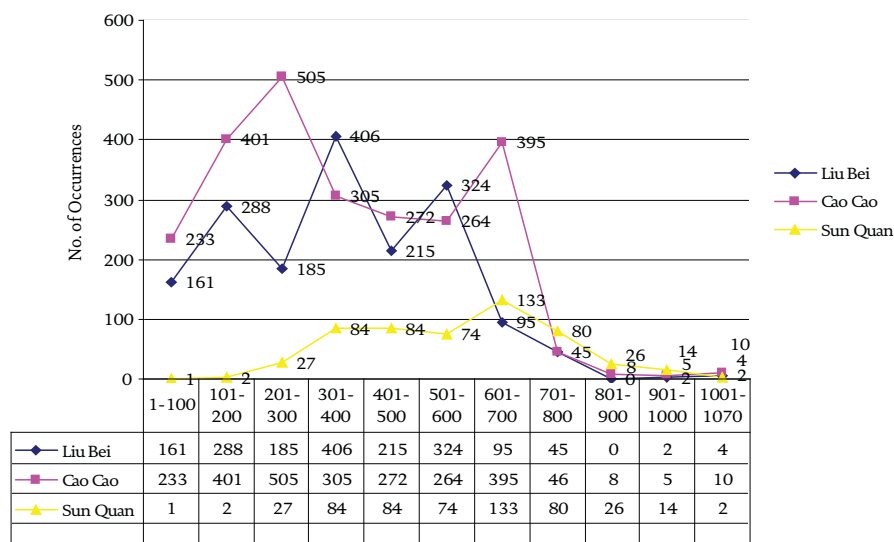


Figure 5 Occurrences of leaders across the page of *Romance of Three Kingdoms*

regarded by Chinese to be relevant for living life *per se* in differing environments.

Often, to grasp the Chinese mind, the non-Chinese may begin by reflecting upon fundamental concepts as embedded in Chinese pictographs. For example, the word, China: *Zhong Guo* (China in pinyin). Unlike many other nations or countries, the Chinese as a civilization has an unbroken continuity of at least 5,000 years. So every time a Chinese person speaks of China, s/he is unconsciously reminded of her/his roots to a central ('*Zhong*') civilization with a rich history. This is also why Chinese take a much longer time horizon when reflecting on issues about the world. For example, in an unpublished manuscript (tentatively called the *Eighth Discipline*, a futuristic novel) this author had set out '*The Wind Theory*' of global change - that the rise of China and the decline of US is but part of a pattern of global developments: one spanning over a thousand years.

What is done here in relating the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* to complexity theory within the chaos literature is but only a beginning. Other analyses are possible, for example linking more visual imagery from complexity theory to the historical novel. Additional statistical analyses of the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* may add new perspectives to the structural configuration of the historical novel. What is illustrated here through the analysis of Cao Cao, Liu Bei and Sun Quan is but one of the many possibilities. The many vignettes in *Three Kingdoms* to CEOs may be seen as a series of Harvard MBA case studies, except they may be strung through a timeline. Since these mini-cases emerge out of a particularly chaotic period of Chinese history, there has to be some lessons on planning, managing, strategic thinking in the context of turbulence. That is besides the utility of *Romance of Three Kingdoms* as a lens for making sense.

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