

# Asynchronous Referencing and the Simulacrum Sangokushi

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**Abstract:** Japan's fascination with cultural artifacts of China cannot be understated, an old remnant of the close ties between the nations during the "Middle Kingdom's" Dynastic era. Today, Japanese pop-culture has countless adaptations of Chinese content in its TV, Movies, and Video Games; to the effect that it dwarfs the representations found in contemporary China. Most prominent of these is the classic novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which has spawned several successful reinterpretations, franchises, and feature-length films. This paper clarifies the nature of these adaptations, which appear to extend the legacy of the characters into the modern day by continuing their story, rather than trying to reevaluate a character in a new light like other intellectual properties. No critical analysis is being done on the characters in the story, who at one point were historical figures, very much grounded in reality. Instead, these "Phantoms" of centuries-old figures continue to live on in the collective memory of Japan, experiencing new scenarios with their personas intact, rather than analyzed. The resulting product is a simulacrum of real history, a copy without any original. The myth of the Three Kingdoms has taken on the role of an untouchable narrative, destined to replicate without consideration for history.

**Keywords:** Sino-Japanese Relations, Simulacrum, Media Studies, History, Sangokushi

## 1. Introduction

How does one decide what media they consume? The obvious line of reasoning leads you into simplifying the process of selection down to personal taste. What we find appealing of course comes from a mixture of societal influences, past experiences, and a general resistance to mundanity. While two of these three categories are difficult to examine with any amount of objectivity or case-by-case consistency, the first example is something easily examined through several methods. Sociology and Cultural History have attempted to track these traditions through the creation of narratives, curating relevant data while cutting out anything deemed unessential.

As cultural expectations of quality are based in their specific society, it is most interesting when you discover a cultural artifact that has reached popularity in a non-native society. It is even more profound

when such an example eclipses the popularity that it has in its nation of origin. This is the case with Japan, as many elements of Chinese culture reach a degree of greater importance upon arrival in popular culture here. These digital *Karamono*, these Chinese artifacts, have held influence over Japanese society for as long as the two nations have communicated; a dialogue of roughly eighteen centuries.

The purpose of this study is to highlight a unique quality of the modern recreation of Chinese classical culture in Japanese popular media. Unlike other cultures, Japan's film and gaming industry have shown a great understanding and reverence for Chinese stories, with many narratives holding a powerful hold on some *Otaku* fandom circles. Many of these narratives vary in levels of factual relevance to history, but one provides a unique opportunity to analyze this phenomenon from multiple perspectives. *Romance of the Three Kingdoms (Sangokushi)* stands alone as a fictional narrative with a solid core of historical content and is also immensely popular in Japan via its many modern interpretations. As it is also adapted in almost every relevant medium in a Japanese History of the Arts, its transformation from the days of the *Edo Bakufu* to the twenty-first century can be used as an example for its counterparts.

Before beginning, it is important to mention some precedent works to this research, as the multidisciplinary nature of the concepts herein requires a lot of preconceived theories. First and foremost, this research is largely inspired by my previous research in the field of Sino-Japanese History, "Visual Echoes of the Middle Kingdom In Japan: A Study of Chinese Artifacts in Japanese Popular Culture", which looked at the centuries long patterns of Chinese cultural consumption in Japan, and how it connects to an overall trend of incorporating ideas from a societal "center" nation. This has ultimately led to a divorcing of the Chinese culture of the dynastic era from the modern political entity.

Continuing from the previous concept of "Echoes" this research uses a mixture of Meta-Historical, Psychoanalytic, and Literary Studies background material, in order to inject a new perspective outside of the realm of "pure" history. Hayden White's efforts to connect literary and historical studies are invaluable to this effort, especially as it pertains to the "mythical realm" a status of narrative that is neither fictive nor truly factual. This connection to literary and media studies allows for analysis using the work of Jean Baudrillard, and his concept of a 'Simulacra', a copy without an original. This idea was later expounded on by Azuma Hiroki in his work *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, which defines simulacra as the result of the degradation of the Grand Narrative of history into Postmodernity. Lastly the usage of Psychoanalytic vocabulary throughout is done in an effort to provide new avenues for studying the actions of entire populations in an almost sociological format. This will in turn be the gateway to further research into this topic in the future, as the research here leaves many new questions unanswered.

## **2. Historical Simulation and Reference Construction**

*Sangokushi* is a culturally significant novel in both China and Japan and has persisted in popularity

for centuries. Unlike the typical fictional story, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, as it's called in English, is a dramatized retelling of historical events that materialized roughly a millennium after they occurred. The characters of this Later Yuan Dynasty story were recreations of the actual warlords, heroes, and advisors of the Three Kingdoms Period, composed by the author's mix of research, personal experience, and creative intuition. Historical record was equally important to the initial characterization of Luo Guanzhong's setting as popular legend, oral storytelling, and localized worship.

Given that the story is only partially based in the chronicles of the 3rd century (*Records of the Three Kingdoms*),<sup>1)</sup> a strictly historical analysis potentially yields that the figures as depicted by Luo cannot be in any meaningful measure regarded as a real or realistic interpretation. This assumption is made purely with the consideration that *Sangokushi* and its many reiterations are typically considered products of historical narratives, and not necessarily the continuation of the narrative itself. It does at many times resemble the structure of such narratives, nonetheless. From the Metahistorical lens of scholars such as Hayden White, the perpetual revision of the story by creative emplotment of events is no different than what one would see in a historiography of a particular region's chronology (White 87), only one which focuses on a wider mass appeal rather than textual depth and realism.<sup>2)</sup>

It is correct to note however, that these works as they are created in the current model of postmodern consumerism are first and foremost done so with the goal of entertaining, with recognition and reflection on the time period depicted serving as a secondary symptom of a consumer's desire for an emotionally compelling narrative. Through this consumption however, the viewer/player of these contemporary movies, series, and games are willfully interacting with the emplotted view of the Three Kingdoms imparted by the author, fabricating their own internal understanding through the invocation of images.

Accepting histories as a product of not only chronicled fact but also the artifice of the author, *Sangokushi* can be analyzed for what it actually is; a heavily mythologized narrative that may lean heavily of the fictive side of the spectrum, but as a result has a softer barrier to entry. This allows figures of the period to persist in public memory, their memetic imprint persisting centuries after physically passing on. As put by literary theorist Jean Baudrillard, "forgetting extermination is a part of extermination." (Baudrillard 49) A person is not truly dead until they are forgotten entirely. The artificial memory of a figure like Sou Sou does not end simply with his absence, just as the Lacanian Real persists in an unobserved, yet immortal state (Eyers 4). The Real in psychoanalytic parlance is something that can never be properly identified or reconciled, as our experience permanently alters our perception of things. It is always present and cannot be completely suppressed. It is also not the same as some objective reality, as the unquantifiable nature of the Real makes it impossible to define without putting it in relation to other subjective realms. This characterization is not done to apply direct comparison of a human soul to the Real, but rather that something that is no longer temporally alive is still *memetically*

alive in society; a figurative ghost haunting a culture. Only when it is forgotten as a concept can the historical meme truly pass away.

The problem with qualifying this *phantasm* of the Three Kingdoms is that this legacy does not exist in a purely immutable form. As Hayden White interpreted through Northrop Frye's conceptual framework (White 82), interpretation of literature is done so externally, a product of not only the author's emplotment, but the reader's own codified perspective.<sup>3)</sup> Just as previously we used the work of Jacques Lacan to identify the 'phantom' left behind by *Sangokushi*, the work of himself and those who came before are equally useful in revealing the process of this creation of legacy. To rephrase this in psychoanalytic vocabulary; the intent of the author in their composition of the work may reflect their own Ego, but it is in turn perceived via the reader's Superego, their own societally altered expectations. The continuous replication of the meme is subjected to generational "decay,"<sup>4)</sup> with the subtle transformation of the narrative both revealing the biases of the author, and that of the primary audience. Over time this can lead to the transformation of many secondary qualities of a narrative, as well as the implied message behind its text, without altering the core of the content.

This kind of transformation has already been observed numerous times with *Sangokushi*, as it has remained in some degree of relevance for over 500 years. After the premature passing of the author, the original version of the novel was dispersed among the public, eventually reaching Japan amid the Sengoku Jidai. This was later translated into vernacular Japanese in the 17th century, raising its popularity outside of the bushi class, and allowing its influence to spread. By the end of the Edo Jidai, characters from the story were referenced in ukiyo-e, kabuki, and bunraku; all to varying levels of success. These later representations often altered key details of either the visual features of the characters, or even the general course of the plot. There was no obvious motive for these later adaptations, except for the purposes of artistic expression, but even the most innocuous examples carry at least some ulterior messaging as part of their narrative.

This trend has continued into the modern era, with *Sangokushi*'s influence reaching into television, cinema, animation, and video games. However, modern characterizations of figures like Gentoku and Sou Sou remain consistent to socially acceptable interpretations, while their deeds and actions are embellished upon to a higher extent. In the case of Koei Tecmo's *Shin Sangoku Musou* series, players simulate these deeds, actively participating in "history" while not necessarily changing their core accomplishments. These adaptations do not attempt to redefine the character as they are known and accepted, rather they simply wish to explore how their character might respond in a different situation. They explore the depths of the character by fabricating new experiences for the long since deceased person. The Battle of Red Cliff, considered by many as the real climax of the story, finds itself at the center of many what-if scenarios. What if Sou Sou's fleet was not completely burned? What if the plan succeeded even further,

and Sou Sou was slain instead? These ideas conflict with a more modernist perspective of adaptation, where in the past a person's legacy may have been reinterpreted via a drastic change in the plot or the character's personality. This would hint that the person who is the subject of narrative revision has reached a mythical status once more, the core of their personality too unmoving to be subjected to a deconstructive analysis.

Take for instance the hit manga, anime, and now live action *Paripi Koumei* (Written by Yotsuba Yuto).<sup>5)</sup> This franchise centers on the experiences of Koumei as he is reincarnated in present-day Japan and becomes the producer to an upcoming musician. Unlike a normal adaptation, no character deconstruction occurs, the personality of the legendary Chinese strategist remains concrete with its greater mythos. This fact is even commented on by another character in the story who considers himself a *Sangokushi Otaku* and recognizes that even if he is not the real Koumei his characterization is flawless.<sup>6)</sup> We don't see an attempt to change Koumei, it is the world that has changed, yet it still has need for his tactical genius. It serves the constructive role of teaching viewers the value of old ideas, ones that have their roots in five centuries of "simulacra", and another thirteen of mythology.

What we see here is the building of a character reference, a database-like construction of a character's personality that serves to solidify their traits into something likened to a new canon. Rather than altering an existing perception to change the academic consensus (like in a typical historical narrative), these adaptations are expanding upon the fictive aspect of the character to illustrate a quality of the figure that is already widely accepted. This reference is not based in a typical chronicle of scientifically reviewed facts, as it actively integrates and generates new fictive interpretations which align themselves with the accepted hyperreality of the simulacrum. The hard-scientific aspect of *Sangokushi* studies has been stagnant for some time, with much of the remaining unexplored avenues of study either lying in the realm of lost materials or heavily malleable word of mouth. This leaves the story as an ever-relevant piece of East Asian culture, yet one that is unable to be interacted with in a purely scientific methodology. The history as we know it now has solidified into myth, and the only thing left to do is to expound upon said mythos.

In popular culture, this phenomenon is not exactly a new concept, rather the point of comparison for Sangokushi provides an example of the pattern emerging within new types of content. Other fictional worlds have been known to reach this state of narrative consumption, but the unique historical origin point of the story makes this a singular example of the interplay between the fictive and the supposed factual. When analyzing a historical narrative, it is next to impossible to separate these two aspects, as the very act of authorship irreparably alters any concept of "truth." The example of *Sangokushi* reveals that there is one very clear way in which we can observe this divide; through simply viewing the patterns of persistence in the face of revision. Even by the 14th century, much of what is understood about the Three

Kingdoms Period was already cohesively analyzed, yet it never reached a degree of saturation that it overtook the importance of the mythology that had built over the past millennium.

There comes a point where the scientific study's effort to establish 'the truth' is rendered irrelevant, where the measurable effect of the fictionalization of the narrative eclipses that of the truth, even when both are presented. This reverence rivals that of the religion or the ideology; two structures that often persist in a state of contradiction. For a historical novelization to hold this degree of soft power over a culture is reminiscent of a national heritage, much in the way the American Founding Fathers have been subjected to similar myth building.<sup>7)</sup> Even this however is limited to its founding nation, which is why the example of *Sangokushi* in Japan proves so unique.

### 3. Asynchronous Referencing

What is being proposed is that the chronicle understanding of the Three Kingdoms period is dead as a purely scientific effort of unearthing new facts, and the narrative understanding of these historical figures has solidified around not the adherence to the historical, but the legacy of heroic deeds found in the mythical. In a typical historiographical analysis of a topic, the starting point is usually in one of two locations. We tend to look at the narrative in a linear fashion, either with the traditional flow of time from the oldest event to the most recent, or in the opposite flow in an effort of uncovering the original narrative in reverse. Due to the nature of how these typical models show preference for the beginning and end points over any point in the transition/transmission, these will be referred to henceforth as *Synchronous Referencing* and *Retro-Synchronous Referencing* respectively.<sup>8)</sup>

These two Synchronous Reference models are very common forms of narrative construction in the histories, however neither of these correctly identify what is occurring with the study of *Sangokushi*. As explained above, the novel and its related historical context have taken on a mythologized identity, one in which the simulacrum narrative created from the genesis of the 'Romance' has superseded the significance of the 'Record'. The narrative importance of the period of civil war at the decline of the Han dynasty was not considered nearly as significant until the creation of a cohesive plot in the novelization, with figures from the time period only receiving reverence in local traditions as disparate heroes, saints, and myths before they were canonized by Luo. Even the time period itself could not be constructed until it was already post-mortem, as the series of events could not be recorded in their completion until they were verifiably deceased.

What this has led to is a model of *Asynchronous Referencing*, a database of anecdotal tales and heroic archetypes which pulls not from the present hyperreality nor past original object, but rather its perception is drawn from somewhere in the transitory, mythical space in the middle. The characterization of the heroes of the Three Kingdoms does not come from any direct wellspring of real genes, but rather the

warped memes left behind by the artistic expressions of legends and worship. *Sangokushi* is a simulacrum, a copy without an original, which also imparts its narrative implications not only forward on the present perception, but also characterizes and recolors the lens in which we view the past. The role of the fiction has achieved primacy, with all other relevant analysis having to first align itself with the mythology. No scientific discovery that could be made at this point could affect the perception of the historical Three Kingdoms; its mythology has reached a point of such significance that to do so would first require a reevaluation of the fictional realm first.

How does this model of reference-based consumption affect those who consume it? For many in the west the history of the Three Kingdoms starts and ends with the novel, and perhaps one or two near-contemporary reinterpretations. For a time, the narrative went into a state of near-hibernation in its nation of origin, largely due to the political policies of the CCP, which spent much of the later 20th century in a state of societal restructuring.<sup>9)</sup> The further expansion of the mythology happens particularly in the popular media of Japan more than other cultural circles, implying some form of memetic connection between the classical literature of China and the modern media of its neighbor. Of course, the novel was brought across in the late Sengoku Jidai and subsequently popularized, however this is only a part of a greater pattern of cultural heritage.

China has long served as a playground for the imagination of Japanese artists, who for much of their history could not simply leave their homeland to visit the “Middle Kingdom” often discussed in intellectual parlance.<sup>10)</sup> The nation existed in its own pocket of mythologized space in Japanese society; a not too distant kingdom that had simultaneously given many great gifts to Japan via political reforms, religious movements, and economic exchange, while also being constantly out of reach for the typical citizen. Everything that was considered the “True China” was already itself filtered through the writings of the few ambassadors sent across to treaty with the emperor of the current dynasty, or the fantastical narratives of literature and illustrations. China as they knew it was just another simulacrum.<sup>11)</sup>

Peculiarly, this mindset continued to the modern era, causing much cognitive dissonance between the China that existed in their myth and the Qing dynasty and later Republic that existed. Had the China they had read about degraded or lost its way? Perhaps the Middle Kingdom as it was written never existed? Both answers rang with some truth; China of the late 19th and early 20th century was neither the mythical empire that was consumed nor the actual state that created that image anymore.<sup>12)</sup> That disagreement with reality likely played at least some role in the events that occurred over the next several decades.

By divorcing the mythical and reality in the postmodern era, Japanese popular culture has accomplished something fascinating in its perception of its most important neighbor; it permanently perceives the existence of two Chinas. This is not to imply some message about geopolitical borders, rather that the

classic Middle Kingdom persists in the popular media of Japan, largely separate from the very real People's Republic. Just as the characters of *Sangokushi* persist beyond their tangible demise via the database and its continuations of their narrative, the cultural patterns of China have become effectively immortal through the mythologizing of Japan.

#### 4. Conclusion

What can be observed in the popular culture of Japan is the resurrection and continuance of an artificial Classical China, which exists separately from the modern state. This mythologized Middle Kingdom is largely fabricated in nature, consisting of fictional references and literary tropes. These components, largely ahistorical in nature, are codified into societal memes through persistent 'adaptations', a term that can only be loosely applied due to the nature of these postmodern works. Rather than altering the core narrative to deliver a different message from the original, these new interpretations build onto the original narrative, adding depth of character and a variety of deeds to existing figures, historical or otherwise.

What is seen specifically in the case of *Sangokushi* is the continued life of these once historical, now simulated people, and adding to the mythos by character studies and "what if" scenarios. These scenarios aren't designed to evaluate a figure's identity by changing their deeds but rather expanding the interpretation of their deeds into new scenarios. This shows a greater, more mature cohesion in the narrative of the Three Kingdoms. Their reference data is in a state of immutability, incapable of being subjected to a total revision.

This type of narrative, deeply solidified in the mythical realm, transcends that of a typical historical work, as it ignores any further transformation by the addition of new facts that might otherwise discredit or disprove parts of the core, fictional element that has achieved primacy. The cultural reverence for this material has reached a status akin to ideology or religion (White 99). It is often rife with internal contradiction but nonetheless embraced by its supporters as an integral part of their culture, whether it is that of the worshipper, or that of the otaku.

What does this mean for the psychology of the consumer in the postmodern age? This mode of hero ideation resembles closely the worship of the past, but for something that is embraced as mostly existing in the fictional realm. Yet even in its fictiveness, there always exists some stripped down core of the original, hidden away underneath flashy special effects and gameplay mechanics that attempt to support the appeal of this 'new history.' Japan's affection for this mythologized China has allowed a continued relationship with the classical center of Asian culture, even now as the contemporary political entities find themselves much more distant.

## Notes

- 1) Officially titled 三国志 (*Sangokushi*) in kanji, the records can be linguistically confusing. The *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was originally titled 三国志演義 (*Sangokushi Engi*) to differentiate between the earlier records and the latter novelization. However, most modern adaptations, fictional or seemingly historical, use the 三国志 title. This is why I will continue to refer to most adaptations with this moniker throughout.
- 2) This type of narrative could be seen as even further afield than other movements referred to as “popular history.”
- 3) This is part of a greater debate on whether historical narratives are “created” or “uncovered.” The specifics of the debate are irrelevant, though my personal inclination is in the former category.
- 4) Decay is being used here to imply that something of the original is inherently lost in the process of adaptation, something only the original author could provide. That said, this is not to imply some sort of loss of value, as these sequentially later interpretations often add something new to them.
- 5) Referring to a Manga, Anime, and live action mini-series of the same name. The English name is *Ya Boy, Kongming*. The name Koumei/Kongming referring to the style name of 諸葛亮 /Zhuge Liang, one of the legendary strategists of the Three Kingdoms Period.
- 6) I allude to the possibility that Koumei is in fact not the actual legend, but a superfan who has mentally taken on some sort of persona. This theory could support my own conclusions to an even greater extent, as it implies that the spirit of Koumei can literally inhabit the body of another, in a more direct form of immortality.
- 7) The mythology of the foundation of the United States of America has developed to the point that developments in societal norms and moral standards have no effect on the evaluation of the Founding Fathers, and the fictional anecdotes that characterize them take precedence. The idea that President George Washington could not tell a lie and was a flawless military commander and impartial statesman come to mind.
- 8) Other more specific terminology could be easily substituted into this model in order to apply it to other topics. For example, applying a Cause-Effect vs. Effect-Cause relationship in a more rational scientific evaluation. Synchronous has been chosen to denote the historian’s obsession with time.
- 9) During the Mao regime / Cultural Revolution, there was a significant push to suppress problematic elements of traditional culture that ran counter to the ideals of the party. This left an opening for Japan to write the core of the traditional Chinese narrative for several decades, when Japan was simultaneously at its most economically potent. His successors lightened these restrictions, but even then this movement did not see a reversal until the 2000s.
- 10) Referring of course to their name in kanji, but also to how efforts were made in the Edo Period to

distance the identity of the “Middle Kingdom” from the Qing Dynasty, and later the Imperial regime from both the Qing and the Republic of China. It is in these circles where alternative names such as Chuka and Shina were conceived for a China that was lacking the cultural mandate of the Middle Kingdom.

- 11) The perception of Middle Kingdom through the Japanese lens was never in actuality the true nature of China, only a projection of the ideal state informed by cultural exportation and philosophical treatises.
- 12) This leads into a greater discussion on the topic of “Little Chinese Ideology,” a movement popular in the greater Sinosphere.

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