

Cross-Cultural Interpretations of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in Southeast Asia: A Review

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Abstract

This literature review examines the state of research on the presence of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a Chinese classical literature, in several Southeast Asian countries. The study aims to explore the cultural significance, adaptations, and interpretations of the novel within the region, highlighting its enduring influence across diverse contexts. Using a search of literature from 2000 to 2024 on mainly Google Scholar, the review emphasizes how elements of the novel—loyalty, strategy, governance, and heroism—manifest in Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. In Vietnam, research documents the integration of the novel's characters and narratives into folklore and resistance traditions. In Thailand, studies reveal its influence on folk tales and traditional theater. In Malaysia and Singapore, scholars emphasize its role in media, political discourse, and educational materials within Chinese communities. In Indonesia, the novel's themes are shown to merge with local folklore and contemporary adaptations, reflecting historical Sino-Southeast Asian interactions. This review provides evidence of the novel's enduring popularity across the region while identifying gaps in the literature, particularly in comparative studies and underexplored cultural dimensions, paving the way for future research into its cross-cultural interpretations.

Keywords: Southeast Asian folk culture, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, cultural adaptation, cross-cultural influence

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Introduction

The classic novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三国演义)(hereafter, RTK), attributed to Luo Guanzhong (罗贯中) in the 14th century (G. Luo, 2004), is a monumental work of historical fiction and one of the “Four Great Classical Novels” of Chinese literature. The novel’s historical backdrop is the Three Kingdoms period (220-280 CE), a time marked by the fragmentation of the Han Empire, widespread war, and the eventual division of China into three rival states: Wei, Shu, and Wu (Besio & Tung, 2012; Chittick, 2001). This era, often romanticized in Chinese culture, represents both the chaos of disunity and the aspiration for reunification. The narrative vividly portrays legendary figures such as Liu Bei (刘备), Cao Cao (曹操), Guan Yu (关羽) and Zhuge Liang (诸葛亮), whose political cunning and martial prowess symbolize the era’s ethos. The novel captures the complex interplay of loyalty, strategy, governance, and heroism. These themes are deeply rooted in Confucian philosophy and Daoist thought, which advocate for moral righteousness, wise leadership, and balance in governance. Widely celebrated for its complexity and philosophical insights, the novel has left an indelible mark on Chinese literary tradition and cultural identity (Eoyang et al., 2021; Mair, 2001). As a semi-historical account, the novel intertwines documented events with fictionalized episodes, contributing to its dual role as both a historical and cultural artifact (De Crespigny, 2010; Vaughn-Lewis, 2009).

Research on RTK has flourished in China, where scholars have extensively analyzed its historical accuracy, literary artistry, and philosophical underpinnings (Fan & Li, 2021; Sun, 2022; Teck Foo, 2008; Zhao & Xu, 2024). Beyond China, studies in Japan (Batson, 2023; Kai, 2017) and Korea (Kwon, 2023; Miao, 2009; Yuan, 2019) have examined its influence on local literature, theater, and popular media, underscoring the novel’s regional significance. In Western academia, it has been translated (Fang & Hou, 2024; C. Liu, 2018; W. Liu & Zou, 2023) and explored through the lens of comparative literature and cultural studies, often focusing on its themes of power, morality, and identity (Clark, 2012; Eoyang et al., 2021; Lei, 2014; J. Luo, 2022). Despite its global reach, however, less attention has been paid to its reception and adaptations in Southeast Asia (SEA), where the novel’s influence manifests uniquely within diverse cultural landscapes.

This study aims to address these gaps by examining the cross-cultural interpretations of RTK in SEA. Specifically, it seeks to explore how the novel’s themes resonate with local traditions and societal values in SEA countries including Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. By synthesizing existing literature, the review highlights the novel’s enduring legacy in the region while identifying underexplored cultural dimensions and potential avenues for future research. The findings are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of the novel’s global and regional significance, emphasizing its role as a bridge between Chinese and SEA cultural histories.

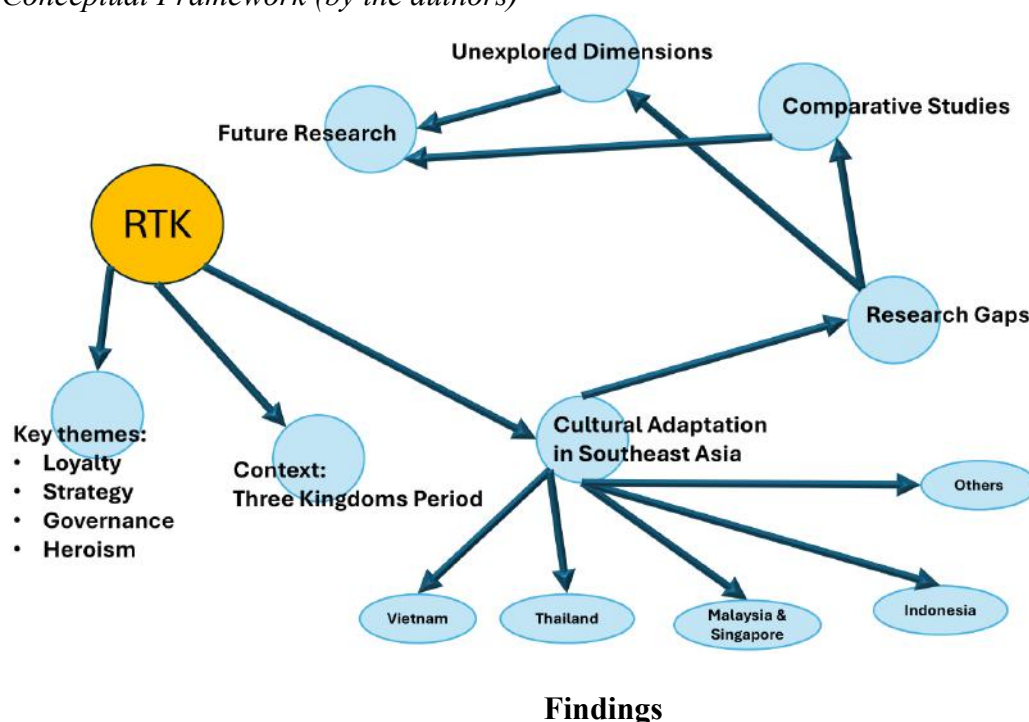
Methodology

This literature review employs a qualitative synthesis of studies published since 2000. Search terms included “Romance of the Three Kingdoms,” “Southeast Asia,” “cultural adaptation,” and country-specific combinations. The search language was limited to English only. Selected studies encompass journal articles, book chapters, and dissertations that address cross-cultural interpretations and adaptations of the novel in the region. This methodology enables an examination of thematic patterns, national adaptations, and research gaps.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework to represent the relationships and thematic connections outlined in the manuscript. At its core is the RTK, a classic literary work. The framework highlights key themes such as loyalty, strategy, governance, and heroism, connecting them to their historical and cultural adaptations across SEA. Each region—Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, and Indonesia—is explored individually, emphasizing how these themes are localized within their cultural contexts. Additionally, the framework identifies research gaps, including the need for comparative studies and exploration of new cultural dimensions. These gaps pave the way for future research directions.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework (by the authors)



Vietnam

Vietnam's culture is influenced by the principles of Confucianism, which emphasize hierarchy, loyalty, filial piety, and the cultivation of moral integrity (Tho, 2016). In Vietnam, RTK occupies a firm position in folklore and cultural traditions, mainly via verbal propagation. It's influence has a history with the migration of the Chinese to the Southeast region, who worship Guan Yu as a special way of existence (Bui et al., 2024). The first full text Vietnamese translation of RTK was known to be published in 1907, consisting of 31 illustrated volumes. In 1909, another translated version was introduced in northern Vietnam. Subsequent reprints and adaptations followed, including different versions published during and after Vietnam war (Fang & Hou, 2021).

The novel has also significantly influenced Vietnamese cultural practices and media. Guan Yu (Hue Khai, 2013) and Zhuge Liang (Wikipedia, n.d.-a) are celebrated as paragons of loyalty and wisdom, respectively. These figures have transcended their original context to become symbols of moral excellence in Vietnamese storytelling and even religious practices. Especially, Guan Yu is often worshipped as a deity in numerous Vietnamese shrines, reflecting his status in local traditions (Hue Khai, 2013; Wikipedia, n.d.-c). Vietnamese

theater and television have further emphasized the novel's narrative depth and ethical themes. Traditional *cailuong* (local opera) has integrated elements of the novel, blending them with indigenous musical and storytelling forms. Theatrical adaptations of RTK have been widely present in Vietnam since the early 20th century. Currently, there are over 40 scripts and adaptations of RTK performed on the *cailuong* stage (Dang, 2021).

In Vietnam, RTK is known to be popular as a tool for teaching moral values and strategic thinking. The novel's lessons on governance and diplomacy are often cited in academic discussions on leadership and political science. However, there are significant literature gaps in research focusing on this topic. Similarly, it is believed that the RTK video games have been particularly popular in East and SEA, including Vietnam. Yet, a lack of research has led to persistent literature gaps regarding the popularity and impact of these games.

Thailand

In Thailand, RTK has influenced folk tales, traditional theater, and storytelling traditions. Studies highlight how its themes have been localized, often blending with Thai folklore and Buddhist principles. Thai adaptations of the novel—including serialized dramas and performances—emphasize the moral lessons of loyalty and leadership. The novel's enduring appeal is evident in the continued production of Thai-language translations and popular adaptations. In 1802, to revive Thai classical literature after the Thai-Burmese War, the King of Bangkok ordered to translate the RTK, known as *Samkok* (Dilokwanich, 1985). Over the next two centuries, *Samkok* gained immense popularity and was highly praised by Thais, producing numerous adaptations, translations, and re-creations. Chapters like “Borrowing Arrows With Thatched Boats” (草船借箭) were later included in Thai secondary school textbooks (Fang & Hou, 2021). The comics adaptation of RTK which were popular in Thailand in recent decades (Verstappen, 2017). In Thailand, RTK has permeated cultural traditions, particularly through its integration into folk narratives and traditional theater. The novel, locally known as *Sam Kok* (Dilokwanich, 1985), has been adapted into *Likay* (a form of traditional Thai folk theater), showcasing its themes of loyalty, heroism, and strategic thinking. These performances often reinterpret the novel's characters and events through a distinctly Thai lens, blending Chinese historical narratives with Buddhist moral teachings (Thak, 2018).

The novel's influence in Thailand extends beyond traditional performances to modern adaptations. Thai television has produced multiple series based on RTK, presenting the epic tales in serialized drama formats (Chinadaily, 2019). These productions have introduced the novel to a broader audience, emphasizing the moral and strategic lessons that resonate with Thai cultural values. For instance, the depiction of Zhuge Liang as a wise strategist aligns with Thai admiration for intelligence and leadership, while the loyalty of Guan Yu inspires reflections on personal and familial obligations (Iamsa-ard et al., 2023). Furthermore, the Thai Chinese community has played a crucial role in preserving and promoting the novel's legacy. Chinese schools in Thailand often include *Samkok* in their curriculum, using it to teach lessons on governance, morality, and historical consciousness (Iamsa-ard et al., 2023). This educational emphasis highlights the novel's enduring role as a cultural bridge between Chinese heritage and Thai society (Thak, 2018).

Despite its popularity, there are gaps in comparative studies that examine how Thai interpretations of RTK differ from those in other SEA countries. Additionally, more research

is needed on the impact of digital media and gaming adaptations of the novel within the Thai context, which could shed light on its evolving reception among younger audiences.

Malaysia and Singapore

Malaysia and Singapore present a unique context where the novel's influence intersects with Chinese diaspora communities. Scholars emphasize its presence in Chinese-language media, educational materials, and political discourse. For example, the novel's themes of governance and strategy have been cited in discussions of political leadership within Chinese-majority communities. Additionally, adaptations of the novel in television, films, and video games have reinforced its cultural resonance in these multicultural societies.

In Malaysia and Singapore, RTK holds a unique position, reflecting the cultural and historical experiences of their significant Chinese diaspora communities (Fang & Hou, 2021). The novel, often read in its original Chinese or translated into English and Malay, serves as both an educational tool and a cultural touchstone. In schools and cultural institutions, it is used to impart lessons on morality, governance, and strategy, reinforcing connections to Chinese heritage. The translation of the RTK first appeared on the Malay Peninsula, translated into Baba Malay and was gradually published in Singapore (BiblioAsia, 2016). In 1992, in Malaysia released a Malay comic adaptation. In 2012, the Malay translation of the RTK was launched in Malaysia thanks to the efforts of publishing houses and the government, which widely disseminated RTK in Malaysia (Fang & Hou, 2021).

In Malaysia, the novel has found its way into local media and entertainment, with adaptations that blend traditional narratives with modern elements (Wikipedia, n.d.-b). For instance, Chinese-language newspapers and television channels frequently reference the novel, drawing parallels between its characters and contemporary political figures. These adaptations often highlight the novel's enduring relevance in discussions of leadership and ethics within Malaysia's multicultural context (WACCCE, 2019). In Singapore, through its bilingual policy, the government has been committed to creating a pool of bicultural talents, by supplementing the teaching of Chinese language with classes on Chinese literature and culture (Li & Qu, 2016). The novel plays a role in fostering cultural identity among Chinese Singaporeans. The themes of loyalty and governance resonate deeply, often used in public discourse and educational curricula to emphasize the importance of moral leadership and collective responsibility. Cultural festivals and literary events occasionally feature dramatizations or discussions of the novel, showcasing its continued relevance in Singaporean society.

Both countries have also embraced digital and gaming adaptations of RTK, with mobile games and online platforms providing new ways to engage with its narratives (Wikipedia, n.d.-d). These adaptations, localized for Malaysian and Singaporean audiences, often incorporate multilingual support and culturally specific marketing, making them accessible to diverse demographics (Wu & Chen, 2020). This digital engagement underscores the novel's adaptability and its ability to connect with modern audiences across generations. However, there remains a lack of comparative research exploring the differing receptions and adaptations of the novel in Malaysia and Singapore. Future studies could examine how each country's unique sociopolitical and cultural contexts shape their interpretations of this Chinese literary classic.

Indonesia

In Indonesia, RTK has merged with local folklore and contemporary adaptations, reflecting the historical interactions between Chinese and Indonesian cultures. Studies note its integration into Wayang theater, where characters and themes are reinterpreted within Javanese and Balinese traditions. Wayang, a traditional form of puppet theater, includes various types such as wayang kulit (leather shadow puppets) and wayang golek (three-dimensional wooden puppets), and is deeply rooted in the cultural practices of Java and Bali (Chandra, 2019). The dramatic stories depicted in wayang performances often draw from Hindu epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as local adaptations of cultural legends (Chandra, 2019).

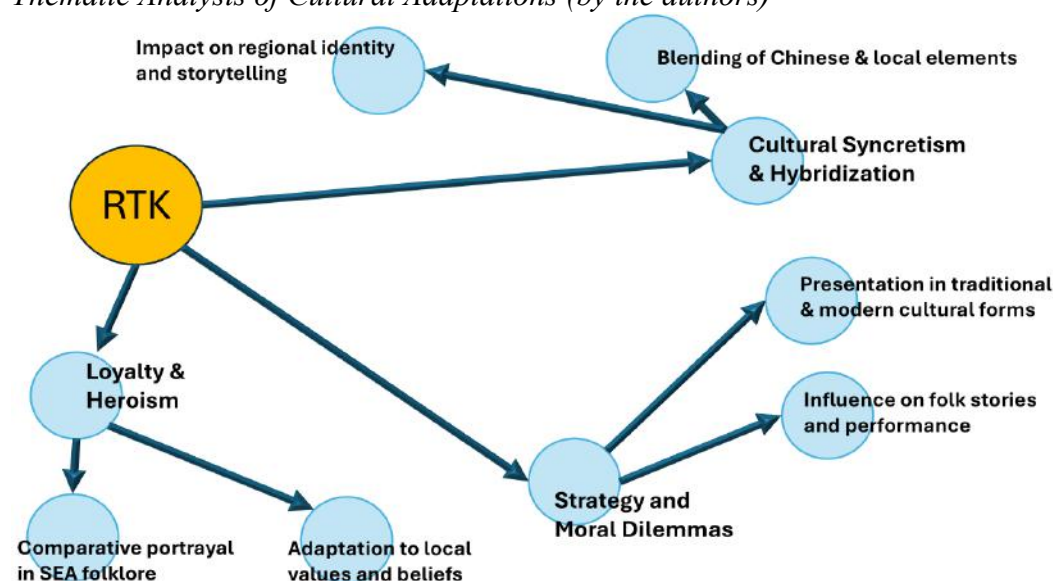
The novel has also inspired Indonesian authors and filmmakers to create modern adaptations that align with local cultural and historical narratives. For instance, the process of translation and adaptation of RTK into Indonesian contexts has led to unique interpretations that resonate with Indonesian audiences. These adaptations often incorporate elements of Indonesian history and folklore, making the stories more relatable and culturally significant (Budhwar, 2023). Additionally, the influence of Chinese culture in Indonesia is evident in various aspects of contemporary Indonesian society, including literature, cinema, and theater (Hoon & Yeremia, 2024). The integration of RTK into Indonesian culture highlights the rich tapestry of cultural exchange and mutual influence between China and Indonesia over the centuries.

Other Southeast Asian Countries

In other SEA countries such as the Philippines, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, the influence of RTK appears more limited. What is known suggests that the novel's presence is primarily linked to the Chinese diaspora communities, where it serves as a cultural artifact connecting these populations to their ancestral heritage. Chinese schools, local associations, and media outlets sometimes feature references to the novel, reinforcing its value within these communities (Fang & Hou, 2021). However, there is a noticeable dearth of scholarly literature and research exploring the novel's impact in these countries. Unlike Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, or Singapore, where RTK has been actively adapted and studied, its reception in other SEA nations remains largely undocumented. This research gap highlights the need for comparative and localized studies to understand whether and how the novel influences cultural or social dynamics beyond the Chinese diaspora. Addressing these gaps would enrich the broader understanding of RTK as a transnational literary phenomenon.

Thematic Analysis of Cultural Adaptations

Figure 2 outlines the key themes derived from the cross-cultural interpretations of RTK in SEA. It centers on three main themes, each theme branches into specific aspects that highlight how the elements have been localized into SEA culture.

Figure 2*Thematic Analysis of Cultural Adaptations (by the authors)*

Loyalty and Heroism

A recurring theme in RTK, loyalty and heroism have been widely embraced in SEA cultural adaptations. Figures like Guan Yu symbolize unwavering loyalty, resonating deeply with historical struggles for independence in Vietnam (Hue Khai, 2013), or in Thailand through performances, which reinterpret the novel's heroic narratives to align with Buddhist principles of moral righteousness (Iamsa-ard et al., 2023). In Malaysia and Singapore, the emphasis on heroism often intertwines with the Chinese diaspora's cultural identity, highlighting moral and communal obligations in their storytelling traditions (Lei, 2014). These adaptations illustrate how loyalty and heroism from the novel are not merely replicated but reshaped to reflect local societal values. For example, while the original Chinese text often frames loyalty in a hierarchical Confucian context, SEA interpretations frequently democratize these values, emphasizing communal solidarity and individual moral choices.

Strategy and Moral Dilemmas

The novel's war strategy depth and portrayal of moral dilemmas have profoundly influenced SEA folk stories and performances. Zhuge Liang's tactical brilliance has inspired numerous tales and performances, often serving as allegories for political wisdom and ethical governance (Clark, 2012). Strategic narratives from the novel are incorporated into traditional drama, where characters face complex moral decisions that resonate with Buddhist teachings about karma and ethical conduct (Thak, 2018). Modern adaptations, such as television series and digital media, further explore these themes. Malaysian adaptations, for instance, juxtapose the novel's emphasis on strategy with contemporary issues like governance and leadership ethics (Shuo, 2024; Zhao & Xu, 2024). Across the region, these cultural forms demonstrate how strategy and moral dilemmas from the novel continue to engage audiences, offering lessons that transcend their historical origins.

Cultural Syncretism and Hybridization

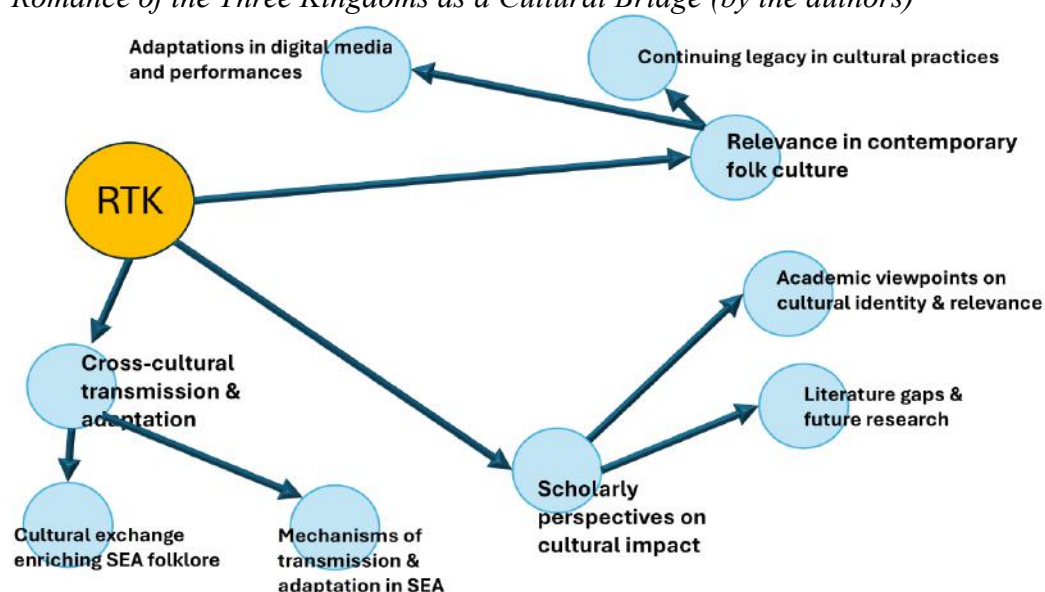
One of the most striking aspects of RTK in SEA is the blending of Chinese and local cultural elements, a process known as cultural syncretism. In Indonesia, the integration of the novel into Wayang theater showcases this hybridization, merging Chinese characters and plots with Javanese storytelling traditions (Budhwar, 2023; Chandra, 2019). Similarly, in Malaysia and Singapore, hybrid adaptations often reflect the multicultural fabric of these societies, incorporating elements from Malay, Indian, and Western cultures alongside the Chinese core (W. Liu & Zou, 2023; WACCCE, 2019). This cultural syncretism not only enriches traditional storytelling methods but also contributes to the evolving regional identity. By blending elements from different traditions, these adaptations ensure the preservation and continued relevance of both Chinese and local cultural heritage, creating a unique narrative space that celebrates diversity.

Romance of the Three Kingdoms as a Cultural Bridge

Figure 3 illustrates the discussion of RTK as a cultural bridge, emphasizing its thematic organization into three core components, each component is further divided into specific aspects.

Figure 3

Romance of the Three Kingdoms as a Cultural Bridge (by the authors)



Cross-Cultural Transmission and Adaptation

The transmission and adaptation of RTK across SEA occurred through historical migration, trade, and cultural exchange, particularly facilitated by Chinese diasporas (Besio & Tung, 2012; Budhwar, 2023; Bui et al., 2024; Thak, 2018). The novel was introduced through oral storytelling, printed translations, and later, modern media such as television and games. These mechanisms have allowed the novel to become integrated into local traditions while retaining its core themes of loyalty, strategy, and governance. Literature highlights how these cultural exchanges have enriched SEA folklore, infusing Chinese narratives into indigenous art forms such as wayang in Indonesia and likay in Thailand (Chandra, 2019; Fang & Hou, 2021; WACCCE, 2019).

Scholarly Perspectives on Cultural Impact

Scholars widely acknowledge the novel's influence in shaping cultural identities in SEA, particularly among Chinese diasporas. Academic studies point to the novel's role in reinforcing communal values and serving as a medium for moral instruction. However, significant gaps remain in understanding its broader societal impact beyond diaspora contexts. For instance, while its integration into educational and artistic practices has been documented in some countries (Kwon, 2023; Li & Qu, 2016; Tho, 2016), comparative studies exploring its reception across the region are scarce. Future research should address these gaps, focusing on underexplored areas such as the novel's influence on contemporary political discourse and its relevance in non-Chinese-majority communities (Eoyang et al., 2021).

Relevance in Contemporary Folk Culture

RTK continues to inspire cultural practices in SEA today, demonstrating its adaptability and enduring appeal. Modern adaptations, such as television dramas, digital games, and online content, have introduced the novel to younger audiences, ensuring its legacy in contemporary popular culture. For example, mobile gaming adaptations have become especially popular in Malaysia and Singapore, offering interactive ways to engage with the novel's themes (Wu & Chen, 2020). Additionally, live performances and cultural festivals frequently draw on the novel's narratives, blending traditional and modern elements to keep the storytelling vibrant. These modern interpretations underscore the novel's capacity to evolve with changing cultural landscapes while preserving its historical and literary significance.

Conclusion

This review highlights the widespread influence of RTK in SEA, where it continues to inspire cultural adaptations and academic inquiry. Its themes of loyalty, strategy, governance, and heroism remain relevant, bridging historical Sino-SEA interactions with contemporary cultural expressions. However, gaps remain in comparative studies that examine cross-national influences and shared cultural dimensions. Additionally, there is a lack of research on lesser-explored cultural elements, such as the novel's impact on culinary traditions or its representation in digital media. Future research should address the identified gaps, particularly in comparative analyses and underexplored cultural dimensions, to deepen our understanding of the novel's cross-cultural interpretations.

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