

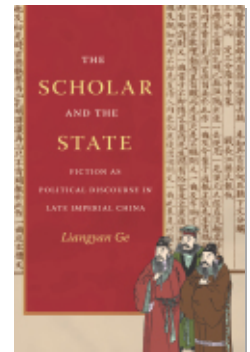


PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Chapter 2. Romance of the Three Kingdoms: The Mencian View of Political Sovereignty

Published by



Ge, Liangyan.

The Scholar and the State: Fiction as Political Discourse in Late Imperial China.

University of Washington Press, 2015.

Project MUSE. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/38161>.

➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/38161>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-31 10:27 GMT)

## *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

### *The Mencian View of Political Sovereignty*

It is by no means coincidental that *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the earliest of the “four masterworks” of Ming fiction, is a historical novel. To be sure, its claim to be a “popular explication” (*yanyi*) of an official history, as its title indicates, may have put a tether on the author’s imagination. Whether Zhang Xuecheng’s (1738–1801) famous assertion that the novel is “seventy percent facts and thirty percent fabrications” (*qifen shishi sanfen xugou*) is accurate or not, the novelist had to maintain at least a nominal allegiance to history.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the novel is heavily selective in its representation and elaboration of the materials from different sources, which may suggest a keen interest not merely in history per se but in using history to allude to the present.<sup>2</sup> “Fiction can reflect popular political attitudes,” as a Western sinologist commented when discussing popular political thoughts reflected in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, “especially when, like this novel, it is political in its conception, and also very popular.”<sup>3</sup> According to another Western scholar, the historical personages and past events in Ming historical fiction are inextricably related to politics, and the novelist’s interest in the historical subject may therefore reflect a concern about the sociopolitical situation of his own time.<sup>4</sup> That view on Ming historical fiction in general is pertinent to *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in particular. An official history such as *Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo zhi*) seldom provided sufficient details of

historical events, which became an opportunity for the novelist. He could flesh out the sketchy recording in official history with information selected from many other sources, not merely to make the narrative a better story but also instill in it a particular type of ethical and political persuasions.<sup>5</sup>

What ethical and political persuasions does one see in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*? And in what ways can the interests reflected in this historical novel be related to the sociopolitical climate in the historical period of its composition? While the earliest known edition of the novel was dated to the early sixteenth century, its manuscript prototype was composed much earlier, most likely in the early decades of the Ming. Most relevant to the discussion here are the early Ming rulers' harsh treatment of the literati and their manipulation of the curriculum of the civil service examinations, epitomized in Zhu Yuanzhang's suppression and expurgation of *Mencius*, a classic that advocates a type of sovereign-subject relationship vastly different from the emperor's political absolutism. In *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Liu Bei, the leader of Shu, is presented as a ruler who wins support from the common people with his compassion and loyalty from his ministers and captains with his fraternal love. The novel also features a plethora of men of talent, with Zhuge Liang, Liu Bei's wise adviser and capable prime minister, as their ultimate representative. Against the background of the sociopolitical life of the early Ming, the coupling of a "benevolent ruler" and a man of great talent in the novel may be considered a literary expression of the Mencian view of political sovereignty when *Mencius* was censored and when the intensity of imperial rule reached an unprecedented level in Chinese history. Precisely because of the painful absence of a reciprocal ruler-subject relationship in reality, a novelistic simulacrum became all the more appealing to the intellectual gentry, who had long been nurtured by the Mencian teaching both morally and politically.

ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS  
AND THE EARLY MING DECADES

The earliest known edition of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, titled *Sanguozhi tongsu yanyi*, features a preface by Jiang Daqi under the pseudonym of Yongyuzi (Mediocre and Slow-Witted Scholar) and another one by Zhang Shangde under the pseudonym of Xiuranzi (Long-Whiskered

Scholar). As these prefaces are dated 1494 and 1522 respectively, that edition could have been published in 1522, possibly following a late fifteenth-century precursor as the 1494 preface might suggest. While no textual exemplars prior to the 1522 edition are extant, it is almost certain that the process of textual evolution had started much earlier. Particularly indicative are some of the interlinear notes on place-names in the 1522 edition, where typically a contemporary place-name is given as a gloss on its ancient and hence more obscure equivalent in the text proper. A number of those contemporary place-names appear in Yuan terms, leading some modern scholars to argue for a Yuan (1279–1368) dating of the text.<sup>6</sup> Yet that argument is compromised by the possibility that such place-names had simply been carried over from preexisting textual sources, especially since some of the notes even contain Song place-names as well.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, there is evidence that the use of place-names was not stringently regulated during the Ming, as some Yuan place-names that had been officially abolished continued to be used.<sup>8</sup> If the original novelist himself was indeed responsible for these interlinear notes, as most scholars seem to believe, one has to agree that the place-names that came into use the latest are actually more useful for the dating of the text.<sup>9</sup> While it was possible for the writer to use a place-name of an earlier period when his knowledge of the present was interfered by his memory of the past, he was not in a position to use one that was yet to be adopted in the future. Since some of the notes contain Ming place-names, it should be considered a reliable indicator that the composition of the novel could not have been completed at any date earlier than the beginning of the Ming.<sup>10</sup>

*Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is considered to be authored by Luo Guanzhong, to whom several other works of fiction and drama are attributed as well. Despite the disappointingly inadequate information about his life, Luo's historicity has now been generally accepted. Unless new discoveries prove otherwise, his status as the primary—if not the only—writer of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* seems too well established to be challenged.<sup>11</sup> Among the few Ming sources about Luo Guanzhong's life, a biographic note on Luo in *A Sequel to the Registry of the Ghosts* (Luguibu xubian), a bibliographical work on late Yuan and early Ming popular drama and dramatists, seems most reliable. According to the compiler Jia Zhongming (b. 1343), he had met his friend Luo Guanzhong for the last time in 1364. If Luo had indeed been writing *Romance of the Three*

*Kingdoms* in the late Yuan, Jia should have known and noted it—especially since their final meeting was only four years before the demise of the dynasty. Instead, the compiler, who was particularly generous in commending the playwrights for their literary and cultural accomplishments outside the field of drama, seemed completely unaware of such a project.<sup>12</sup> More importantly, even at the time of his compilation of *A Sequel to the Registry of the Ghosts*, which was no earlier than 1424, Jia still could not associate Luo Guanzhong with any text of *Three Kingdoms*, and lamented in a note that he even did not know how his friend's life had ended.<sup>13</sup> Given the statement in the Jiang Daqi preface—that once the manuscript of the novel was completed literati scholars had “vied with each other to copy it out”—Jia's words can be particularly significant.<sup>14</sup> Since virtually all the extant editions of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* uniformly acknowledge Luo Guanzhong's authorship, the attribution must have been established early, most likely during the novel's manuscript stage. If such a long manuscript by Luo was in broad circulation at the time, it would be highly unlikely that Jia Zhongming, as such a central figure in the circles of popular literature, should have been unaware of it. That could mean that the circulation and transmission of the manuscript described in the Jiang Daqi preface had not yet taken place by 1424.

As Jia Zhongming's “friend despite a big age gap” (*wangnianjiao*), Luo Guanzhong might have been at least ten years Jia's senior, and would have been at least ninety years old in 1424 if still alive. In fact, Jia simply took Luo's death for granted in his note. On all accounts, Luo's writing career must have ended by then. We do not know whether Luo Guanzhong had completed the writing of the novel during his lifetime. Since the circulation of the manuscript described in the Jiang Daqi preface most likely had not taken place by 1424, it was possible that the manuscript was brought to completion by someone else after that date. However, if we maintain that Luo Guanzhong was the primary writer of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, it still seems reasonable to believe that the bulk of the novel had been composed during the early decades of the Ming without completely ruling out the possibility of its initiation in the final few years of the Yuan.<sup>15</sup>

To be sure, nobody knows exactly what the early Ming textual prototype of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* looked like, yet the relative textual stability among different recensions of the novel can be revealing to us.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike the truly vernacular *Water Margin*, which evolved in proximity to popular orality and incorporated from a variety of oral genres on the levels of both story making and discourse making, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, with its multiple textual sources, did not have to rely on a sustained contact with an ongoing oral tradition. As it appears in a mixture of written vernacular (*baihua*) with simplified classical Chinese (*wenyan*), its narrative discourse was less susceptible to the changes in the living language. Where the basic narrative text is concerned, even the pictorial *zhizhuan* editions published by Fujian booksellers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—including *Sanguo zhizhuan*, *Sanguo zhizhuan pinglin*, and others—do not feature major deviations from the 1522 edition. While it was possible, as some modern scholars have suggested, that the *zhizhuan* editions followed a textual exemplar separate from and prior to the 1522 edition,<sup>17</sup> “they cannot be said to comprise a separate textual system” comparable to the “simpler recension” (*jianben*) of *Water Margin*, as Andrew Plaks has judiciously observed.<sup>18</sup> This relative textual stability has an important corollary. While it is obvious that one should not take the 1522 print as a replica of the nonextant Luo Guanzhong prototype,<sup>19</sup> textual changes during the process of manuscript transmission may have been relatively limited, and the essential narrative discourse may have remained largely intact.<sup>20</sup> Since the primary concern here is with the narrative plot rather than details of rhetoric of the novel, the following analysis relies on the 1522 edition as a surrogate for the early Ming text. The discussion of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in the rest of this chapter, unless otherwise noted, all pertains to the 1522 edition.

#### THE EARLY MING IMPERIAL CENSORSHIP OF *MENCIUS*

Nothing was more symbolic of the early Ming political climate than what happened to *Mencius* (Mengzi), one of the canonized Four Books (*sishu*) of Confucianism and hence a central component of the examination curriculum. As early as 1372, Zhu Yuanzhang became infuriated at the following passage in *Mencius*, which suggests that the loyalty of subjects is not to be taken for granted by the ruler but has to be won with the ruler’s compassion and benevolence: “Mencius said to King Xuan of the Qi: ‘If a prince [*jun*] treats his subjects [*chen*] as his hands and feet, they will treat him as their belly and heart. If he treats them as his horses and hounds,

they will treat him as a stranger. If he treats them as mud and weeds, they will treat him as an enemy.”<sup>21</sup>

The Mencian teaching here obviously ran counter to Zhu Yuanzhang’s intent for absolute sovereign power. As *Mencius* was on every examination candidate’s reading list, it could potentially become a threat to Zhu Yuanzhang’s political agenda. Denouncing that passage as “improper words by a subject,” the emperor adamantly demanded that Mencius be removed from the official pantheon of Confucian sages. Only at the daring remonstrations of the minister of justice Qian Tang and other scholar-officials, did the emperor finally relent and retract that order.<sup>22</sup>

Yet Zhu Yuanzhang’s anger against the classic was never soothed, nor was it confined to that particular passage alone. He insisted that all the passages he found objectionable be removed from the classic. After the examinations were reinstated in 1384, Zhu Yuanzhang increasingly felt the need for a censored edition of *Mencius*. Eventually, in 1394, *Expurgated Mencius* (*Mengzi jiewen*) was published, compiled by Liu Sanwu (1319–1400) and his fellow Hanlin academicians. As many as eighty-five entries in *Mencius* were deleted. Some of them dwell on the view that the legitimacy of the political authority of the ruler should be based on the will of the ruled, and others, like the one cited earlier, advocate mutual respect between a ruler and his ministers or even moral tutelage of just and righteous ministers over their sovereign master.<sup>23</sup> According to the mid-Ming scholar Zhu Yunming (1460–1526), Emperor Hongwu tried to justify the expurgation by describing those removed entries as being out of accord with the times: “Mencius wrote in the Warring States period, and that was the reason his words are sometimes excessively querulous [*yiyang taiguo*]. Today the empire is unified, and therefore students cannot get his intended meaning [*benyi*] but hastily use [his book] in their speeches and actions.”<sup>24</sup> Zhu Yuanzhang’s publicly expressed wrath against the “Second Sage” (*ya sheng*) in the Confucian tradition and his brazen tampering with a consecrated text spoke volumes of the unbridled power of the throne vis-à-vis the *daotong*, which the intellectual elite had long claimed to represent.

Indeed, Zhu Yuanzhang’s phobia of *Mencius*, especially the passages on the ruler-subject relationship, was not surprising. Many such passages could have assumed topical relevance during the early Ming, as the emperor, despite his occasional display of gentleness, often treated the lite-

rati like “mud and weeds.” Even Song Lian (1310–81), probably the most respected scholar-official of the time, was implicated in the Hu Weiyong (?–1380) case. Only at the persistent remonstrations from his empress did Zhu Yuanzhang spare Song’s life; Song, however, died anyway shortly afterward in exile.<sup>25</sup> Another example was what happened during the 1397 metropolitan examination, the last one under the Hongwu reign. The fifty-two candidates who passed the examination turned out to be all from the culturally rich south. Zhu Yuanzhang was suspicious of the partiality of the examiners, Liu Sanwu and Bai Xindao, who were themselves southerners, and appointed Zhang Xin and eleven others as investigators of the case. When the investigators’ report reaffirmed the original result of the examination, the infuriated emperor had Bai Xindao, Zhang Xin, and several others executed and Liu Sanwu exiled. After that the emperor himself conducted a reexamination and passed sixty-one candidates, all northerners.<sup>26</sup> Ironically, Liu Sanwu, who had served as Zhu Yuanzhang’s pawn in the anti-Mencius campaign only a few years before, became himself a victim of the type of tyranny so fiercely denounced in *Mencius*.

By far the most prestigious school of the early Ming period was Guozijian, the Imperial Academy, which served as the most important base for the production of civil officials.<sup>27</sup> Given such prominence of the school, Zhu Yuanzhang’s treatment of the students there can be taken as a measurement of the status of the intellectual gentry at large. In 1382, the emperor issued harsh injunctions regarding the conduct of the students at the academy and had them inscribed on a stone tablet. Any violations of these disciplinary codes could incur a severe beating, banishment to remote frontiers, or even death. Under the superintendent Song Na (d. 1390), deprivation of meals was adopted as a punishment, and every month at least one student either starved to death or hanged himself.<sup>28</sup> Some instructors became concerned. In 1385, one of them, Jin Wenzheng, discussed the matter with the minister of personnel Yu Kai and attempted to make the seventy-five-year-old Song retire, but on hearing of this Zhu Yuanzhang became so enraged that he had Jin, Yu, and several other instructors executed.<sup>29</sup> Even that did not quell all the complaints from the students. In 1394, a student named Yue Lin could not stand the abuse any longer and posted a leaflet of protest. He would have been, according to the regulations set by Zhu Yuanzhang himself, punishable by one hundred strikes of stick flogging followed by exile. But that was not enough



to soothe the wrath of the emperor, who instead had the poor student beheaded and the chopped-off head publicly displayed at the top of a pole standing in front of the academy. Furthermore, Zhu Yuanzhang returned to the academy in 1397 to deliver a stern reprimand, in which he threatened that anyone who repeated Yue Lin's offence would be put to death by dismembering (*lingchi*) and that his entire family would be exiled to "the farthest southwest frontiers."<sup>30</sup>

The pole that had carried Yue Lin's chopped-off head stood in front of the Imperial Academy as a warning to the students until 1519, when it was finally removed at the order of Emperor Wuzong (r. 1506–21). By that time, however, the importance of the academy had significantly diminished. Significantly, all the Ming emperors throughout the fifteenth century kept that pole in place. For over one hundred years it remained a symbol of the absolute power of the imperial state and its suffocating dominance over the intellectuals.

Much of Zhu Yuanzhang's cruelty was inherited by Zhu Di. As victor of a bloody civil war, Zhu Di brutally executed dozens of Emperor Jianwen's top civil officials when his coercion for their switch of allegiance was met with defiance and contempt. Among those slain was Fang Xiaoru (1357–1402), who had enjoyed such prestige among the intellectual elite that the monk Daoyan (i.e., Yao Guangxiao, 1335–1418), Zhu Di's top adviser, warned the usurper: "To kill Fang Xiaoru would be to eradicate the seeds of scholarship across the entire empire."<sup>31</sup> When Zhu Di commanded Fang to draft the announcement of his succession to the throne, the prince had the audacity to compare himself to Duke Zhou (Zhou Gong), the legendary brother of King Wu of the Zhou who served devotedly as regent for his nephew, King Cheng (Cheng Wang). Fang steadfastly refused to write the announcement and scornfully berated Zhu Di for the usurpation. The infuriated usurper ruthlessly tortured Fang both physically and mentally for seven days before finally having him dismembered.<sup>32</sup> Ever since Confucius's famous expression of anxiety about not seeing Duke Zhou in his dreams, the duke had been regarded in the Confucian tradition as the ultimate paradigm of the moral and intellectual guidance of the *dao* over secular state power.<sup>33</sup> Zhu Di's forced analogy of his bloody usurpation with Duke Zhou's regency was therefore enormously grotesque.

*Mencius* was censored for over four decades, from 1372, when Zhu Yuanzhang publicly expressed anger over the classic, to 1415, when its

complete text was officially reinstated in *Grand Collection of Commentaries on the Four Books* (Sishu daquan). Following the reinstatement of the examinations in 1384, *Mencius* played only a marginal role in official recruitment; after the publication of *Expurgated Mencius* in 1394, “none of the eighty-five entries” excluded from the expurgated version were allowed “to appear in any examination questions or be used as criteria for passing candidates.”<sup>34</sup> Even after 1415, those passages were only rarely mentioned in provincial and metropolitan examinations.<sup>35</sup> Unsurprisingly, when *Mencius* was under the imperial censorship, the power of the throne was unchecked. When Zhu Di restored the complete version of *Mencius*, he did so for the same purpose that his father had expurgated it: to utilize the classic for his own political gain. Ironically, the Mencian view against absolute political sovereignty that had once angered Zhu Yuanzhang now became for Zhu Di a much-needed justification for his usurpation. The rehabilitation of the classic, therefore, became just one more example of the throne’s manipulation of the Confucian canon and the examination curriculum.

#### ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS AND THE MENCIAN IDEA OF THE BENEVOLENT RULER

At the core of the Mencian political philosophy—which Benjamin A. Elman calls “an ascending view of political sovereignty” as it stressed the importance of the ruled for the ruler—was the notion of benevolent governance (*renzheng*).<sup>36</sup> Mencius believed that human nature was innately good.<sup>37</sup> From that premise, he went on to advocate that all people had the natural potential to realize their moral endowment. That sanguine estimate of the average person’s moral nature gave rise to the view that the mandate of heaven for a ruler was identical with the mandate from the people: “Heaven sees with the eyes of its people. Heaven hears with the ears of its people.”<sup>38</sup> Citing the examples of Jie and Zhou, two tyrannical kings of ancient times, Mencius further dwells on this relationship between the ruler and the ruled:

It was through losing the people that Jie and Zhou lost the empire, and through losing the people’s hearts that they lost their people. There is a way to win the empire; win the people and you will win the empire. There

is a way to win the people; win their hearts and you will win the people. There is a way to win their hearts; amass what they want for them; do not impose what they dislike on them. That is all. The people turn to the benevolent as water flows downwards or as animals head for the wilds. Thus the otter drives the fish to the deep; thus the hawk drives birds to the bushes; and thus Jie and Zhou drove the people to Tang and King Wu. Now if a ruler in the empire is drawn to benevolence, all the feudal lords will drive the people to him. He cannot but be a true king.<sup>39</sup>

In one of the most celebrated dictums by any ancient Chinese thinkers, Mencius summarizes his idea of political sovereignty most succinctly: “The people are of supreme importance; the altars to the gods of earth and grain come next; last comes the ruler” (*Min wei gui, sheji ci zhi, jun wei qing*).<sup>40</sup>

The notion of benevolent governance plays a more prominent role in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* perhaps than anywhere else in premodern Chinese fiction. Among the rulers of the Three Kingdoms—Cao Cao, Sun Quan, and Liu Bei—only Liu is presented in the novel as a legitimate contender for the Han throne. One reason is, of course, his marginal kinship to the imperial lineage and his honorary title as “Imperial Uncle” (Huangshu). That is indeed the point Zhu Xi makes in the prefatory piece (titled “Fanli”) to *Yupi Tongjian gangmu*, where Liu Bei’s Shu is regarded as “orthodox rule” (*zhengtong*) while both the Wei and the Wu are denigrated as “illegitimate states” (*jianguo*).<sup>41</sup> It is also the stance Mao Zonggang (1632–1709) assumes at the beginning of his “How to Read *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*” (*Du Sanguo zhi fa*), where he advocates that imperial lineage, rather than “territorial considerations” (*lun di*), should be the criterion for determining legitimate succession.<sup>42</sup> However, while imperial lineage is certainly an issue in the 1522 edition, it does not occupy such a prominent place as in the Mao Zonggang version.<sup>43</sup> On several occasions in the 1522 edition, this line appears several times in only slight verbal variations: “The Empire does not belong to any one person; it belongs to all the people in the Empire.”<sup>44</sup> Significantly, all instances of that line are consistently obliterated in the Mao edition. Another line also frequently recurs in the 1522 edition: “The virtueless should give way to the virtuous” (*wude rang youde*). Any ruler can lose the mandate of heaven if he strays from the appropriate path, and in that case he deserves to be

replaced by someone morally superior, whether or not he is a member of the imperial clan. “Everyone,” as Lu Su says to Sun Quan, “can become a Yao or a Shun,” citing the names of the legendary kings in the antiquity to whom the throne was abdicated because of their exemplary virtues (SGZTSYY, 2:951). Evidently, the 1522 edition does not attempt to justify Liu Bei’s claim to succession merely with his kinship to the Han imperial lineage.

Although *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is not completely consistent in its depiction of Liu Bei, it presents him as a benevolent and righteous ruler. In that regard, it is not only radically different from the official history *Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms*, where Liu Bei is not considered a legitimate contender for the throne, but also a far cry from *Popular Stories of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguozhi pinghua*), the narrative text from the popular Three Kingdom cycles. Episodes that exemplify Liu Bei’s righteous behavior, regardless of their origins, become amplified and elaborated in the novel. For instance, Liu’s persistent declinations to take over Xuzhou (from his friend Tao Qian) and Jingzhou (from his clansman Liu Biao), mentioned only cursorily in *Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms* and completely absent from *Popular Stories of the Three Kingdoms*, become two lengthy narrative stretches in the novel fleshed out with all details. Meanwhile, narrative details that could potentially compromise Liu Bei’s character are consistently removed or modified. One early example is the whipping of the inspector (*duyou*) after Liu Bei is made a local magistrate in the county of Anxi (SGZTSYY, chap. 2). In *Chronicle*, it is Liu who ties up and thrashes the arrogant inspector. In *Popular Stories*, Zhang Fei kills a prefect and then beats the inspector to death in Liu’s presence. In the novel, however, Zhang Fei is the one who beats the inspector without Liu’s knowledge, and Liu then restrains the impetuous Zhang from killing the inspector. Furthermore, in *Popular Stories* Liu Bei and his sworn brothers become bandit chieftains in the Taihang Mountains after Zhang Fei’s rampage. In the novel, however, they never become bandits, only hiding briefly at the place of one of Liu Bei’s kinsmen in Daizhou (SGZTSYY, chap. 2).

Several other episodes in the novel contribute to this elevated version of Liu Bei. He avoids “the slightest disturbance to the local people” when he is a county official in Anxi (SGZTSYY, 1:48). People line up on the streets in Xuzhou, entreating him to become their prefect (SGZTSYY, 1:651). And

he successfully reforms the political administration as the magistrate of Xinye, “to the delight of soldiers and civilians alike” (SGZTSYY, 2:1103). Of particular interest is Liu Bei’s retreat from Cao Cao’s ferocious offense before the Red Cliffs battle, when thousands of the residents in the counties of Xinye and Fancheng flee along with Liu’s troops. The flocks of refugees become an encumbrance for the exodus while Cao Cao’s forces are getting closer, but Liu refuses to abandon the civilians. Of that incident *Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms* offers a very brief account: “Someone said to the Previous Master [*xianzhu*]: ‘We should move quickly to secure Jiangling. While we have many people now, most of them are not soldiers. If Cao’s forces arrive, what can we do?’ The Previous Master replied: ‘The foundation for any great cause is always the people. Now that they have been following me, how can I bear to abandon them?’”<sup>45</sup> The narration in *Popular Stories of the Three Kingdoms* is even sketchier. Despite the generally pro-Shu stance in the popular narrative, Liu Bei’s attitude toward the refugees is noncommittal at best: “The Counselor [*junshi*] spoke to the Imperial Uncle: ‘Cao’s troops are getting closer. If we still take care of the civilians, what can we do if Cao arrives?’ Xuande [i.e., Liu Bei] didn’t say anything in reply.”<sup>46</sup>

In the novel, however, this episode becomes significantly amplified with vivid details about the interaction between Liu Bei and his civilian followers:

The people of the two counties, old and young, cried out in unison: “We will follow Lord Liu till the end of our lives.” That same day, amid weeps and tears, the exodus began. . . . Chased by Cao Cao’s forces, the civilians from Xinye and Fancheng, supporting the elders and carrying the babies, bringing along sons and daughters, crossed the river like rolling waves. Bitter cries rang out on both shores ceaselessly. Standing on his boat, Xuande was deeply saddened: “These common folk have all been made to suffer this disaster for my sake. What is left for me to drag out this existence for?” So saying, he attempted to throw himself into the water, but was restrained by those around him. Everyone that heard him was moved to tears. After reaching the south shore, Xuande looked back to those on the other side who were still waiting tearfully to cross the river. He immediately asked Yunchang to send the boats back in a hurry before he at last mounted the horse. . . . Kongming said: “. . . We have such a multitude of

more than one hundred thousand people, but most are civilians and few are soldiers. . . . Wouldn't it be expedient to leave the people behind for now and go ahead ourselves?" In tears, Xuande replied: "The foundation for any great cause is always the people. Now that they have been following me, how can I bear to abandon them?" Everyone that heard of this incident was deeply moved. (SGZTSYY, 3:1321-28)

This comparison of the different narrative treatments of the same episode illustrates the novelist's effort to accentuate Liu Bei's compassion and benevolence, qualities that the novel further heightens through a contrast of Liu with other warlords. Early in the novel, Dong Zhuo, a potential usurper of the Han throne, plans to move the capital of the empire to Chang'an. When several ministers object to this on the grounds of possible disruption to the ordinary people, Dong replies furiously: "I plan for the empire, and why should I feel sorry for those lowly commoners!" Xun Shuang, one of the ministers, protests: "The people are the foundation for an empire. Only if the foundation is solid will the empire be peaceful." That admonition, however, falls on Dong's deaf ears (SGZTSYY, 1:180).

Cao Cao is portrayed in the novel as being just as ruthless to the common people when provoked. When one of Tao Qian's captains kills Cao's father, the vengeful Cao launches a bloody massacre in Tao's cities (SGZTSYY, 1:321). As for Sun Quan, the novel does not depict him as a scourge to the people, but neither is he presented on any occasion as kind and sympathetic. While Cao Cao once calls himself and Liu Bei the only two "men of aspirations" (*yingxiong*) of the time, the novel presents them more often than not as a pair of antitheses. Summarizing his strategy in confronting and countering Cao Cao, Liu Bei says: "The one who struggles against me like fire against water is Cao Cao. Where Cao is impetuous I am temperate; where he is harsh I am benevolent; where he is cunning I am sincere" (SGZTSYY, 3:1923-34). The novel's depiction of Liu Bei should not always be taken at face value, but in general the "Imperial Uncle" is portrayed as an idealistic ruler of benevolence and righteousness.

#### THE RULER AND HIS TREATMENT OF MEN OF TALENT

As mentioned earlier, in Zhu Yuanzhang's *Expurgated Mencius* many Mencian passages on the ruler-minister relationship were obliterated. It is

precisely this kind of relationship that takes a central place in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The contention among the three kingdoms for dominance over the empire becomes a competition for men of superior abilities. In the novel, one finds a relentless effort to rewrite history in order to highlight the rulers' recruitment and retention of talents, which is what Mao Zonggang suggests in his *dufa* essay: "There are many histories of former times, but people are especially fond of reading the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* because there was no other period in which so many talents flourished at the same time."<sup>47</sup>

One example of a ruler incapable of employing and treating talented men properly is Yuan Shao. During much of the early portion of the Jian'an reign (196–219), Yuan is indisputably the strongest of the warlords, boasting the largest army and two of the most formidable warriors of the time, Yan Liang and Wen Chou. Although he has a team of capable advisers, his indecisiveness and suspicion feed the factionalism among them. Ignoring his chief strategist Tian Feng's sensible analysis of the military situation, Yuan rushes to a showdown with Cao Cao at Guandu, and his numerically superior forces are badly defeated. Turning shame into anger, the narrow-minded Yuan then kills Tian Feng in prison, while another of his top aides, Xu You, defects to Cao Cao. Yuan's demise becomes inevitable after he squanders away most of the talent on his side: "The pillars for the North of the River are all broken, / How can Yuan Shao not lose his homeland?" (SGZTSYY, 2:997).

In contrast, the leaders of Shu, Wei, and Wu are all remarkably adept in soliciting the service of men of talent, and that is precisely the reason they manage to survive the tangling warfare and establish their respective power bases. Sun Quan may not be a good warrior, but he is superior in "selecting and employing worthy and capable men and enlisting their consistent loyalty from their respective posts" (*juxian renneng, gejin qixin*), as his predecessor and older brother Sun Ce appraises him (SGZTSYY, 2:941). Right after Sun Ce's death, Sun Quan hears these words from Zhou Yu, his chief counselor and strategist: "Today men of ambitions are contending with each other. Those who find good men will prosper, and those who don't will perish. Your Lordship must seek the support of brilliant and far-seeing intellects" (SGZTSYY, 2:947).

What Zhou Yu says here becomes the guiding motto for Sun Quan. Indeed, his relationship with Zhou Yu himself best exemplifies his suc-

cessful efforts in using his personal trust and friendship to win unwavering loyalty and dedicated service from talented men. Before the battle at Red Cliffs, Jiang Gan, one of Cao Cao's counselors, volunteers to visit Zhou Yu, trying to persuade Zhou to defect to Cao. Jiang, however, sees the futility of his mission when he hears Zhou Yu describe his relationship with Sun Quan in these words:

Living as a man of aspirations in this world, I have had the good fortune to serve a lord who appreciates me. In our public capacities we are tied by the amity between a ruler and a minister, and in private we are bonded by the feelings of kinship. What I say, he does; what I propose, he approves. We share with each other all weal and woe. Were the eloquent orators of the old times—Su Qin, Zhang Yi, Lu Jia, and Li Yiji—resurrected to walk the earth again, delivering speeches like rolling streams and wielding their tongues like sharp swords, they would not be able to move me. Let alone any of those pedantic scholars of the present day! (SGZTSYY, 3:1475)

What one sees between Sun Quan and Zhou Yu is also seen between Sun and another of his top aides, Lu Su. After the victory at Red Cliffs over Cao Cao, Lu Su goes to join Sun Quan, and the ruler stands by the roadside to welcome the counselor. Afterward Sun quietly asks the overwhelmingly flattered Lu whether his deferential greeting can be taken as sufficient recognition of his meritorious service. Lu first surprises his lord by saying “No,” and then delights him with this explanation: “Not until I see your power and virtue prevail throughout the Four Seas and Nine Provinces and Your Highness assume the imperial throne” (SGZTSYY, 3:1690).

Like Sun Quan, Cao Cao is also skillful in handling the relationships with his men of abilities. His victory over Yuan Shao, just as he reminisces while paying a visit to Yuan's grave, is primarily because of his superior aptitude in “employing men of intelligence across the land” (SGZTSYY, 2:1069). His eagerness to recruit the best talents is clearly demonstrated in his reception of Xu You, Yuan Shao's defecting adviser. At the time Cao is already undressed for bed, but when Xu's arrival is announced, he dashes out—barefoot—to greet Xu, rubbing his hands in excitement and laughing with delight. Once inside the tent, Cao seats Xu and then prostrates himself before his “old friend.” Overwhelmed by such warmth and



respect, Xu You is immediately convinced that Cao is a different kind of leader from Yuan Shao (SGZTSYY, 2:971).

With such eagerness to employ men of intelligence, Cao Cao surrounds himself with a plethora of wise and capable advisers. Among them is Chen Lin, who once wrote a formal denunciation of Cao Cao for Yuan Shao. While that powerful document once irritated Cao profoundly, Cao rejects others' advice to kill Chen when Chen becomes his captive, and puts him on his staff instead in order to make use of his talent. Indeed, these words that the novel cites from the *Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms* on the historical Cao Cao serve as an apt appraisal of the fictional Cao Cao as well: he is able "to recognize men of extraordinary talent and to promote them regardless of their humble origins" (*shiba qicai, buju weijian*) (SGZTSYY, 4:2512). Cao is clearly aware that the success of his cause relies more on the wisdom of his counselors than on the prowess of his warriors. Just as his victory over Yuan Shao at Guandu is largely due to Xu You's plan to destroy Yuan's supplies, he believes his defeat at Red Cliffs could have been avoided if Guo Jia, another of his top advisers, had still been alive at the time.

In contrast, however, Cao Cao's attitude toward men of talent is often poisoned by his mistrust and suspicion. Having masterminded the Guandu victory for Cao Cao, Xu You is soon killed by Cao's captain Xu Chu, most likely with Cao's acquiescence.<sup>48</sup> Cao's personal loathing for the defiant spirit of Kong Rong, a brilliant scion of Confucius, eventually prompts him to put Kong to death. Ironically, Kong's final suggestion, if heeded, could have prevented the Red Cliffs debacle for Cao. Yang Xiu, arguably the smartest of Cao's advisers, is executed because he is able to read Cao's innermost thoughts from the slightest inklings. Yang is reckless in parading his endowments in total disregard of the gravity of the situation, but the more fundamental cause for the tragedy is Cao's jealousy of Yang's stupendous genius.<sup>49</sup> An even more typical example is Xun Yu. When Cao Cao needs Xun's service, he calls Xun "my Zifang" (*wu zhi Zifang*), comparing him to Zhang Liang, the wise adviser to the founding emperor of the Han, Liu Bang. After Cao has secured his control of the Central Plain, however, he puts Xun Yu to death for his forthright remonstrations. What happens to Xun Yu happens to his nephew Xun You later. When Cao Cao plans to proclaim himself King of the Wei, Xun You's dissent incurs Cao's wrath, and the fearful Xun soon dies of illness. The

final advice of the older Xun to Cao Cao—that “a true gentleman shows his love for others through his virtue” (*Junzi ai ren yi de*)—fails to generate in the perverse leader any love either for himself or for his nephew (SGZTSYY, 4:1960).

The tragedy of the Xuns is strikingly similar to that of another man of talent—although of a different type—the “miracle-working physician” Hua Tuo. When Cao Cao suffers a severe headache, he summons the physician. Diagnosing the cause of the pain to be some kind of silting fluid in the head, the physician offers to open Cao’s skull with a cleaver after general anesthesia. Suspecting Hua to be an assassin, the enraged ruler sends the physician into prison and has him killed there. By doing so, Cao has himself compared unfavorably with another patient of Hua Tuo’s, the Shu general Guan Yu, who lets the physician scrape his bone—with no anesthesia—in the middle of a chess game. But the Hua Tuo–Cao Cao episode is much more significant than just an antithesis to the Guan Yu story: even Hua Tuo fails to understand that Cao Cao is actually more gravely ill than his headache indicates. Despite being “miracle-working” physician, Hua cannot cure the ruler’s hopeless disease of unwarranted and obdurate suspicion. Interestingly, the Hua Tuo story in the novel is based on an extensive transformation of its sources in historiography.<sup>50</sup> Unlike those sources, the novel has Cao Cao die of the illness soon after Hua Tuo’s death. Ironically, by killing the only physician that could possibly save his life, the patient virtually kills himself.

In general, Cao Cao’s treatment of men of talent is blatantly utilitarian. He uses them to promote his cause and he knows well that their service is indispensable. Yet, while he demands their absolute loyalty, he does not offer sincere friendship or camaraderie in return. Instead, he is more interested in Machiavellian manipulation and control. In that respect he is different from Sun Quan and, to an even larger extent, Liu Bei. To steal the capable strategist Xu Shu from Liu Bei, Cao resorts to the abominable trick of detaining Xu’s old mother. Taking a forged letter to be an authentic one, Xu Shu hastens to leave Liu Bei in order to save his mother, only to receive a bitter tirade from the old lady for having abandoned a righteous ruler to join a treacherous one. The bitterly disappointed mother subsequently hangs herself, and Xu Shu, although staying with Cao Cao, remains loyal to Liu Bei the rest of his life. During the Red Cliffs battle, Xu Shu is the one that sees through Pang Tong’s intention in persuading

Cao Cao to have his boats linked up with chains. Instead of saving Cao's navy from the impending attack with fire, Xu finds an excuse to leave the battlefield.

Xu Shu's enduring allegiance to Liu Bei is by no means surprising. Early in Liu Bei's career, when all his civil officials are no more than "pasty-faced students" (*baimian shusheng*), Liu is anxious to find a better adviser. Then Xu Shu, under the pseudonym of Shan Fu, comes to join him. But before he offers his service, Xu puts Liu to a moral test. As Liu's horse is said to have an ominous potential to ruin its owner, Xu pretends to suggest that Liu give the horse away as a gift. By refusing to put someone else in harm's way, Liu proves himself a humane and virtuous ruler. Xu thus willingly becomes his chief adviser, and soon his skills in directing battles impress friends and foes alike.

When Xu Shu asks for Liu Bei's permission to leave in order to save his mother, several of Liu's men insist that Liu should not let him go. To them, Liu Bei replies: "It would be inhumane for me to use the son while letting the mother be killed. It would be dishonorable for me to hold him against his own will and prevent the son from performing his filial duties. I would rather die than do such an inhumane and dishonorable thing" (*bu wei buren buyi zhi shi*) (SGZTSYY, 2:1165). Liu Bei arranges a farewell dinner for Xu Shu, at which the lord and the counselor face each other and weep bitterly. The prospect of losing his friend to his enemy makes Liu Bei feel as if he were "losing both hands" (*ru shi zuoyoushou*) (SGZTSYY, 2:1165). The next morning, Xu Shu takes his departure, and at this point the novel presents a powerful farewell scene:

They went for a league without noticing it. "Your Lordship should not take the trouble of escorting me so far," Xu Shu said. "I will travel overnight to see my mother." After Xuande went with him for another league, the officers pleaded him to return. Remaining on horseback, Xuande took Xu Shu's hand, "How sad I am to see you go." So saying, Xuande dried his tears with his sleeve. Xu Shu also wept as he parted from his master. Halting his horse by the edge of the forest, Xuande watched Xu Shu and his small entourage race to the distance. He cried again, before Sun Qian and others came over to console him. "Xu Shu is gone! What will become of me now?" Xuande tried to follow Xu Shu with his tearful eyes, but his view was blocked by a large clump of trees. Pointing to the trees with his

whip, he shouted, “I want all those damn trees cut down!” Sun Qian asked, “Why?” “Because I want to see Xu Shu one more time!” answered the lord.  
(SGZTSYY, 2:1165–69)

The novel’s rendering of the Xu Shu episode is the result of an assiduous and painstaking effort to elaborate on what was a paltry detail in the sources. Apart from his recommendation of Zhuge Liang, the Xu Shu story is completely absent from *Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms*. In *Popular Stories of the Three Kingdoms*, Xu Shu leaves Liu Bei because he feels concerned about his mother’s safety, but there is no mention of Cao Cao’s custody of her. The farewell scene in *Popular Stories* is narrated in a short paragraph of less than two hundred characters.<sup>51</sup> In *History as Mirror to Aid Governance* (Zizhi tongjian), it is mentioned that Xu’s mother was detained by Cao Cao, but there is no mention of Liu Bei’s farewell banquet and his subsequent sending-off of Xu Shu.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, no known Three Kingdoms plays from the Yuan and Ming periods are based on the Xu Shu story. The only play that features Xu Shu as a major character is Gao Wenxiu’s play *Meeting in Xiangyang* (Xiangyang hui). Part of the play is about Liu Bei’s acquisition of Xu Shu’s service, but there is nothing about Cao Cao’s imprisonment of Xu’s mother or Xu’s subsequent departure from Liu.

Indeed one may consider Xu Shu a typical literatus who, like thousands of his brethren in imperial China, wishes to achieve fame and success through public service and to leave his name in history. For that end, he needs first to have a “wise ruler” (*mingzhu*) recognize his talent and ability. What he chants while meeting Liu Bei for the first time is akin to the collective voice of the intellectual gentry, not only that of the Three Kingdoms period but of the novelist’s own time as well:

Across the land there are worthy men,  
Who long for a wise ruler [*mingzhu*] to whom to repair.  
The sage lord is seeking worthy men,  
Of me, alas, he remains totally unaware.  
(SGZTSYY, 2:1138)

The Xu Shu story is particularly significant as it is about one scholar receiving strikingly different treatments from two rulers, both hoping to enlist his service. Indeed, it reminds one of this Mencian passage, a passage that

was, unsurprisingly, removed from the classic by Zhu Yuanzhang: “Mencius said, ‘Bo Yi would serve only the right prince and befriend only the right man. He would not take his place at the court of an evil man, nor would he converse with him. For him to do so would be like sitting in mud and pitch wearing a court cap and gown.’”<sup>53</sup> Bolstered by numerous other examples in the novel, Xu Shu’s experience dramatizes a scholar’s relationship with the state power, demonstrating his loyalty and gratitude toward a virtuous and appreciative ruler as well as his renunciation and rejection of an abusing and insolent one.

#### ZHUGE LIANG AND OFFICIAL RECRUITMENT

Yet the Xu Shu story is, after all, only a prelude to the advent of Zhuge Liang, by far the brightest star in the galaxy of talents in the novel.<sup>54</sup> Judging from Zhuge Liang’s “Memorial for Launching the Expeditions” (*Chushi biao*), Liu Bei’s repeated visits to Zhuge’s residence in an effort to recruit his service may have been a historical fact.<sup>55</sup> Yet in *Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms* Liu’s visits are mentioned only in passing, in one single sentence: “The Previous Lord went to visit Liang, but did not get to see him until the third trip.”<sup>56</sup> In *Popular Stories of the Three Kingdoms* the account of the visits remains very brief. In the novel, however, the visits are related in a long stretch of narrative that is clearly one of the most elaborate and memorable episodes of the entire work. According to some historical sources, Zhuge Liang may have presented himself to Liu Bei first before the ruler started his recruiting effort. The novelist, interestingly, completely disregarded those sources, even though they are cited in Pei Songzhi’s annotation of *Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms* and therefore conveniently accessible.<sup>57</sup>

After taking departure from Liu Bei, Xu Shu, feeling deeply obliged by the ruler’s friendship, goes directly to see Zhuge Liang to notify him of Liu’s upcoming visit. Zhuge Liang, seemingly enjoying his life of reclusion too much to enter officialdom, appears to be annoyed and blames Xu Shu for trying to make him “the victim of a sacrifice” (SGZTSYY, 2:1174). During Liu Bei’s visits in the company of his sworn brothers, the ruler’s longing to meet his future adviser is repeatedly thwarted, as he constantly misidentifies people around Zhuge—his friends, brother, and father-in-law—for the Reclining Dragon himself. During the last visit, even though

Zhuge happens to be home, Liu Bei has to wait for hours before the sage wakes from a long nap. In this tortuous episode narrated in lavish detail, Liu Bei seems to be on an almost endless quest for an ever-elusive goal. Of course, this is a familiar narrative ploy to repeatedly postpone the climax and thus tantalize the reader, yet one can better appreciate the merit and significance of this “three visits” episode in an expanded context. Given the fact that Zhuge Liang has been informed by Xu Shu of Liu Bei’s imminent visit in advance, his apparent snub to the visiting ruler is obviously premeditated. As Xu Shu had done before him, Zhuge Liang wants to test the lord’s sincerity and moral standing. Once again, the positions of a ruler and a scholar in the real world—where a scholar had to pass the examinations before being granted an imperial audience and an official appointment—are turned upside-down in the novel. Historically, Liu Bei may have indeed visited Zhuge Liang three times, but the number of three frequently appears in Chinese vernacular fiction, especially in works with oral or folkloric antecedents.<sup>58</sup> In this “three visits” episode the number happens to be the force that drives the reversal home: while a scholar in reality had to pass examinations at three different levels before entering officialdom, the ruler in the fictional world passes three tests before he finally succeeds in recruiting the man of extraordinary talent.

Zhuge Liang’s reluctance to leave reclusion is more apparent than real. While he certainly loves the idyllic life in his native place Longzhong, he has been following affairs of the empire closely. His analyses of the political and military situation for Liu Bei during the latter’s final visit cannot be any improvised oration but the result of a careful and thorough study. Despite Zhuge Liang’s ostensible aloofness and apathy to his recruiter, the secluded sage has actually been expecting eagerly to be recruited. During his long career as the commander of the Shu forces, Zhuge Liang may sometimes appear like a Daoist wizard, but the young man in the thatched cottage is clearly presented more as a Confucian scholar bidding for his opportunity to enter public service.<sup>59</sup> During Liu Bei’s second visit, the ruler mistakes Zhuge Liang’s younger brother, Zhuge Jun, for his future counselor. Zhuge Jun chants these lines, which obviously speak of his brother’s mind more than his own:

The phoenix flying ten thousand *li* will roost only on the jade,  
The scholar staying home until a true lord’s minister he is made.

Tilling his furrowed fields his destined moment he awaits,  
 In books and poems his pride and aspirations he places.  
 The day he meets a wise lord will never be too late,  
 His fabulous talents will take the world to a better date.  
 Saving the people from miseries, he will pacify the empire,  
 Leaving his name in history, to his home he will retire.  
 (SGZTSYY, 2:1197–98)

The difference between the Zhuge Liang in the novel and the Zhuge Liang as a Daoist figure elsewhere in the Three Kingdoms tradition is clearly discernible from some verbal divergences. In the “three visits” episode in the *Popular Stories of the Three Kingdoms*, Zhuge Liang is said to be an “immortal” (*shenxian*). His residence is referred to as *an*, which can mean a thatched hut but also a Daoist sanctuary. The latter is more probable in the text, because his boy servant is referred to as *daotong*, a Daoist novice. In his conversation with Zhuge Liang, Liu Bei addresses him sometimes as *xiansheng* (sir) but more often as *shifu*, a term usually reserved for a religious master.<sup>60</sup> In contrast, the novelistic Zhuge Liang lives in his *caotang*, which means, unequivocally, a thatched cottage. His young servant is referred to as *tongzi*, which means simply “boy.” Furthermore, Liu Bei now addresses his host consistently as *xiansheng* and never as *shifu*. There is a similar difference between the novel and the Three Kingdoms variety plays (*zaju*). The anonymous Yuan-edition variety play *Zhuge Liang Attacks [Cao Cao’s] Camp in Bowang with Fire* (Zhuge Liang Bowang shaotun) starts with the scene of Zhuge’s reception of Liu Bei’s third visit. In his self-introducing monologue at the beginning of the scene, Zhuge Liang refers to himself as “this humble Daoist” (*pindao*) and indicates that Reclining Dragon, his sobriquet in the novel, is his “Daoist monastic name” (*daohao*).<sup>61</sup> That format of self-introduction is inherited in Ming Three Kingdoms variety plays and Ming texts of Yuan Three Kingdoms plays that feature Zhuge Liang as a major character, including the Ming version of *Zhuge Liang Attacks [Cao Cao’s] Camp in Bowang*. Throughout these plays *pindao* is Zhuge Liang’s standard term for self-reference, and all the Shu captains call him sometimes *junshi* (army adviser) but more often *shifu*.<sup>62</sup> In *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, however, Zhuge Liang refers to himself invariably as Liang, and none of the Shu captains ever address him as *shifu*. Such systematic and sweeping changes of the

appellations clearly suggest a conscious effort in the novel to remove part of the Daoist coloration of Zhuge Liang from the popular Three Kingdoms tradition and transform him into a new figure who is fundamentally Confucian. Furthermore, there is even a subtle difference in the description of Zhuge Liang's attire. While there is no such a description in *Popular Stories of the Three Kingdoms*, his costume in the variety plays is invariably a "cloud-rolling hat" (*juanyun guan*) and a "red-cloud crane Daoist gown" (*hongyunhe daopao*). In the novel, however, Zhuge Liang is said to have a "plaited silken band" (*lunjin*) on his head and a "crane cloak" (*he chang*) draped over his shoulders when he receives Liu Bei during Liu's third visit (SGZTSYY, 2:1212).

Meanwhile, the novel painstakingly heightens the difference between Zhuge Liang and a pedantic academic. In that regard the most telling moment is Zhuge Liang's debate with the civil officials of Wu when he visits Sun Quan before the Red Cliffs battle. When a Wu official asks him what classics he specializes in, Zhuge Liang seizes the opportunity to set himself apart from "the text-bound pedants" (*xunzhang zhajiu zhi furu*):

Just think of Yi Yin who tilled the soil in Shen and Jiang Ziya who fished on the Wei River. Just think of men like Zhang Liang and Chen Ping, or Geng Yan and Deng Yu. These worthies of the old times all had the abilities and wisdom to sustain the rule of their kings. But what classics did they specialize in? Do you really think they were like schoolboys spending their days between the writing brush and the ink stone? Do you really think they did nothing but argued with others over trivial textual details and flaunted their compositional skills?<sup>63</sup>

To retort the accusation from another Wu official that he has no genuine learning to justify his prominent position, Zhuge proceeds to dwell on the difference between two kinds of scholars, "scholars of noble character" (*junzi zhi ru*) and "scholars with petty interests" (*xiaoren zhi ru*):

There are scholars of noble character and scholars with petty interests. The former are righteous and gentle, filial to their parents and loyal to their sovereigns. Looking up they can see the patterns of heaven, and looking down they can understand the principles of earth. Between heaven and earth they benefit myriads of people. Because of their good governance



the empire is as firm as a rock, and because of their achievements their names are written in history. The latter, on the other hand, are those who are engrossed in polishing their words and trivial compositions. When they are young they start to write rhyme-prose, and when they are aged they still bend on the classics. While thousands of words may flow from their writing brushes, in their minds not a single useful idea can be found. (SGZTSYY, 3:1405-6)

One may consider these observations by Zhuge Liang a most incisive commentary on the political institution of official recruitment. Little wonder that Li Yu, who rejected the examination system, readily echoes Zhuge Liang in his marginal comment on *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*: “Most of those who have ruined the world are students of the classics. What is the use of those pedants?”<sup>64</sup> One should remember that this ridicule of the “text-bound” pedants is not as pertinent to the time of the historical Zhuge Liang as to the time the fictional character Zhuge Liang was fashioned. While the status of the Confucian classics was lifted after Confucianism became the state ideology during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han, the classics were not extensively used as a criterion for official recruitment except for the selection of *boshi dizi*.<sup>65</sup> Nor did the belles-lettres play nearly as significant a role in the official selection of that time as they did in the Tang and Song periods. The major means for selecting officials from among the commoners during the Han and Three Kingdoms periods was the so-called *chaju*, a recommendatory system. While it was supplemented with some kind of examinations, for the most part those examinations did not require rigorous training in the classics.<sup>66</sup> It was in later dynastic periods, especially after the Song, that exegeses and textual learning became almost exclusively the basis for the curriculum of the civil service examinations. This “text-bound” mechanism of talent selection, unsurprisingly, led to the proliferation of “text-bound” scholars. During the Ming, the tendency to equate talent with textual scholarship became compounded by the obsession with a rigid format of examination writing known as the “eight-legged essay” (*bagu wen*), which had evolved from Wang Anshi’s *jingyi shi*, the format that the Song prime minister prescribed for the answers to examination questions on the classics.<sup>67</sup> Consequently, many scholars devoted themselves to studying the model eight-legged essays by successful examina-

tion candidates in addition to the classics, thus becoming trapped in an even deeper swamp of texts.

Significantly, for Zhuge Liang's debate with the Wu officials, there is no textual source in *Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms*, *Popular Stories of the Three Kingdoms*, or any extant Yuan or Ming Three Kingdoms variety plays. If the play titles in *A Registry of the Ghosts* and *A Sequel to the Registry of the Ghosts* can serve as indicators, the debate is not likely to have been the subject matter in any of the nonextant Three Kingdoms plays, either. Zhuge Liang's anachronistic denunciation of text-bound pedantry, therefore, was most probably the novelist's invention, a commentary on the official recruitment of his own time that was based exclusively on textual scholarship and a rigid writing style. Yet, what speaks even louder in denouncing the textually centered official selection is Zhuge Liang's superbly successful official career itself as presented in the novel. As a scholar of "noble character" who knows "the patterns of heaven" and "the principles of earth," Zhuge Liang never stoops to the "petty interests" of polishing words in "trivial compositions." His successful official career thus belies any inevitable connection between textual learning and the talent required for officialdom.

Just as the novelist presents Zhuge Liang's talent as of a completely different type from the talent sought in the civil service examinations, he carefully highlights Liu Bei's manner of official recruitment in order to address the concerns about official selection of his own time. In contrast to the early Ming emperors' manipulation of the examination curriculum and intimidation of the examination candidates, Liu Bei insists on recruiting officials in "the proper way," that is, by demonstrating sincerity, respect, and appreciation. After Liu Bei's first visit to Zhuge Liang ends in futility, Zhang Fei suggests that Liu should summon Zhuge instead of making another trip to see him. Liu Bei appeals for more patience from his sworn brother by citing the Mencian line: "To wish to meet a good and wise man while not following the proper way is like wishing him to enter while shutting the door against him" (SGZTSYY, 2:1192).<sup>68</sup> After the second visit, when both Guan Yu and Zhang Fei try to dissuade him from going for a third trip, Liu Bei responds by expressing his determination to emulate Duke Huan of the Qi who went to visit a commoner five times before getting to see him (SGZTSYY, 2:1207).<sup>69</sup> These allusions here may carry a

topical relevance to the early Ming, when Zhu Yuanzhang killed several scholars “who refused to be employed by the sovereign.”<sup>70</sup>

The novel’s presentation of Liu Bei’s humility in recruiting the service of Zhuge Liang may be considered an effort to restore some of the dignity of the literati that had been debased and disgraced by the imperial state. As one recalls, intellectuals upholding their dignity in the face of political power is precisely one of the central ideas in *Mencius*. Mencius himself had this to say of people in power after turning down an invitation from the King of Qi: “They may have their wealth, but I have my benevolence; they may have their exalted rank, but I have my integrity. In what way do I suffer in the comparison?”<sup>71</sup> Scholars, as advocated in *Mencius*, were able to offset their political disadvantage with their moral and intellectual superiority. One example presented in *Mencius* is Zi Si, Confucius’s grandson, who is reported to have said this to Duke Miao (Miao Gong): “In point of position, you are the prince and I am your subject. How dare I be friends with you? In point of virtue, it is you who ought to serve me. How can you presume to be friends with me?”<sup>72</sup> Elsewhere, when Mencius was asked about the conditions for the *shi* in the antiquity to take office, the sage is said to have answered:

“There are three conditions,” said Mencius, “under each of which he would take office; equally, there are three conditions under each of which he would relinquish it. First, when he was sent for with the greatest respect, in accordance with the proper rites, and told that his advice would be put into practice, he would go. But when his advice was not put into practice, he would leave, even though the courtesies were still observed. Second, when he was sent for with the greatest respect, in accordance with the proper rites, he would go, though his advice was not put into practice. But he would leave when the courtesies were no longer meticulously observed. Third, when he could no longer afford to eat either in the morning or in the evening, and was so weak from hunger that he could no longer go out of doors, then he could accept charity from the prince who, hearing of his plight, gave to him out of kindness, saying, ‘As I have failed, in the first instance, to put into practice the way he taught, and then failed to listen to his advice, it will be to my shame if he dies of hunger in my domain.’ But the purpose of this acceptance is merely to ward off starvation.”<sup>73</sup>

Despite the probably overgrown technicalities of these “conditions,” the Mencian message here is clear: the *shi* deserve respect and appreciation from the ruler before they agree to serve in officialdom. To a significant extent, the novel’s presentation of Liu Bei’s recruitment of Zhuge Liang illustrates that Mencian view.

LIU BEI AND ZHUGE LIANG:  
THE IDEAL RULER–PRIME MINISTER RELATIONSHIP

Liu Bei’s humility toward Zhuge Liang does not end with his recruiting effort. After Zhuge Liang becomes his chief strategist, Liu Bei treats Zhuge as his mentor (*yi shili dai zhi*), and compares his relationship to Zhuge to that of a fish to water. The lord and the counselor “eat at the same table and sleep on the same couch, spending all their time discussing the events in the empire” (SGZTSYY, 2:1224). Even the initial doubts by Liu Bei’s two sworn brothers about the scholar’s ability are dispersed after Zhuge wins the battles at Bowang and Xinye against Cao Cao’s numerically superior forces.<sup>74</sup> The young adviser sometimes even appears more like the lord’s superior than his aide. Seeing Liu Bei winding a yak’s tail into a hat as a pastime, Zhuge Liang gives his master “a stern look” (*zhengse*) and lectures him on the danger of sapping his aspirations by indulging in such frivolous pleasures. The embarrassed lord instantly tosses his toy away and engages his adviser in a discussion of the military situation (SGZTSYY, 2:1264). Later, when Liu Bei stays in Wu for months enchanted by all the sensual pleasures as Sun Quan’s new brother-in-law, it is Zhuge’s “ruses in brocade bags” (*jinnang miaoji*) entrusted to Zhao Yun that ensure the lord’s swift and safe return. Such incidents epitomize the ruler-adviser relationship. As Zhuge Liang consistently serves as the guiding force of the Shu regime, Liu Bei becomes utterly trustful in Zhuge, letting his adviser make decisions for him in many crucial situations. That, however, does not reduce Liu Bei to a mere figurehead. Liu’s more accurate appraisal of Ma Su proves him to be a sounder judge of character than his sagacious counselor, whose credulity of Ma’s flashy display of knowledge leads to a major military setback at Jieting years later. Yet the Ma Su episode, seemingly damaging to Zhuge Liang’s status, is paradoxically reaffirming as well: since Liu Bei has such penetrating eyes for true talent, his complete trust in Zhuge Liang cannot have been misplaced.

The most critical moment in the ruler–prime minister relationship arrives when Liu Bei becomes emotionally overwhelmed by the deaths of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei. To avenge his sworn brothers, Liu Bei impetuously brushes aside Zhuge Liang’s remonstrations and rushes to lead an expedition against Wu, which the adviser argues is more an ally than a foe. When the judicious ruler is reduced to a devastated and vengeful sworn brother, he quickly loses his sense of judgment. Blindly confident in his numerically superior army, Liu Bei camps all his troops along the wooded bank of the Yangzi River, disregarding the suggestion by his aides to seek advice from Zhuge Liang. When the startled prime minister sends his words, Liu Bei’s forces have already fallen victim to an attack with fire, ironically the same kind of assault that Zhuge himself has inflicted so many times on his enemies. However, even in his folly Liu Bei is different from either Yuan Shao or Cao Cao. On his deathbed, the remorseful lord, in tears, admits to his mistake in front of his grief-stricken chief counselor: “How could I have so foolishly rejected your advice and brought this defeat upon myself?” Then the dying lord entrusts Zhuge with the regency for his son and heir, Liu Shan:

The Previous Emperor continued as he wept, “Your talent is ten times superior to Cao Pi’s, and I am sure you will be able to secure the empire and complete our cause. If my heir is worthy of support, support him. If he proves otherwise, please take the throne yourself in Chengdu.” Hearing this, Kongming was disconcerted, perspiring profusely. He prostrated himself again and said tearfully, “How can I do otherwise than serve as his right-hand man and remain loyal till the very end of my life?” He knocked his forehead to the floor until his eyes bled.

Again the Previous Emperor asked Kongming to sit on his couch. He summoned his sons, Prince Lu Liu Yong and Prince Liang Liu Li, and instructed: “Bear my words in your minds. After I’m gone, I want you and Liu Shan to treat Prime Minister as father. If you show any disrespect, you will be unfilial sons deserving to be eradicated by both men and gods!” Then he said to Kongming, “Please be seated, Prime Minister, and let my sons kowtow to you to acknowledge you as father.” The two princes did accordingly, and Kongming said, “Were I to die the cruelest death, I could never return the kindness from Your Majesty.” (SGZTSYY, 5:2725–26)

While Liu Bei has always cherished Zhuge Liang's service, it takes a colossal blunder on his own part to help him fully appreciate the true value of his chief counselor. This deathbed scene thus marks the culmination of their relationship. Ever since the early days of Zhuge Liang's career, he and his lord have been like brothers. That brotherly bond has developed sometimes as a complement to and sometimes in rivalry with the other set of fraternal relationships, the sworn-brotherhood between Liu Bei and his two top captains, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei. Although there are occasions of moral dilemma such as the one of Guan Yu's release of Cao Cao after the latter's defeat at Red Cliffs, in general Guan and Zhang have faithfully fulfilled their obligations as both friends and subjects. Yet to keep the fraternal devotion merely on a personal level, as Liu Bei does in his expedition against Wu, can only be destructive to the cause of restoring the house of the Han. Significantly, after his attempt to revenge his sworn brothers has led to that disastrous end, Liu Bei is now back, in his last moment of life, attempting to formalize the other brotherly bond by making his chief adviser the surrogate father to his sons. While Zhuge has not shared Liu's vengeful vehemence over the deaths of Guan and Zhang, the brotherhood between the ruler and the prime minister is of a different type, one that is not based on anything like the Peach Garden pledge to die on the same day but on the shared commitment to a common cause.

Liu Bei's request that Zhuge Liang take over the imperial authority when necessary may be akin to the stereotyped scene of Tao Qian's pleading with Liu Bei to take over the prefectship of Xuzhou.<sup>75</sup> Yet, as Liu Bei's proposed transfer of power does not involve merely an official position but the imperial throne itself, it assumes unparalleled magnitude and once again challenges the traditional notion of orthodox rule. Within the novel itself, it contrasts sharply with the two forced abdications at swordpoint: the last Han emperor Liu Xie's handover of the throne to Cao Pi and its almost retributive replay in Cao Huan's relinquishment of power to Sima Yan. In an expanded context, of course, it echoes the time-honored legends of the voluntary transmissions of power among the ancient sage-kings, from Yao to Shun and then from Shun to Yu, a line of succession where virtue and talent took precedence over blood lineage. To be sure, Liu Bei's proposal is only hypothetical. As it turns out, Zhuge Liang, just as he has promised Liu Bei, remains for the rest of his life a prime minister steadfastly loyal to Liu Shan. It is possible, as Mao Zonggang has sug-

gested, that Liu Bei makes that proposal precisely because he is absolutely assured that Zhuge will never turn it into a fact.<sup>76</sup> In that case, the proposal becomes a political tactic. Even if that is the case, it still indicates Liu Bei's staunch confidence in Zhuge Liang's loyalty and devotion. At any rate, the lord's deathbed request to his counselor is an ultimate expression of trust, respect, and appreciation, which secures for his son the continued dedication from the man of unmatched talent and wisdom.

This kind of reciprocal ruler-minister relationship is exactly what is advocated in many of those passages removed from *Mencius*. Liu Bei is depicted as a ruler who treats his chief counselor "as his hands and feet," to borrow the words from that famous Mencian passage. And the counselor, in return, treats his master as his "belly and heart." Indeed the metaphor "hands and feet" frequently recurs in the novel's description of Liu Bei's relationships with his men. When the master sends Xu Shu off, as mentioned earlier, he likens Xu's departure to his "loss of both hands." And, of course, the fraternity between Liu and his two sworn brothers—although warriors rather than scholars—is frequently termed *shouzu zhi qing*, literally, the attachment to others as if they were of the same body as oneself.<sup>77</sup>

It is obvious that the novel's depiction of Liu Bei's relationship to his men becomes all the more potent against the foil of Cao Cao. Even though deviating from his historical counterpart, Cao Cao might have appeared much more realistic to the early audience of the novel. Perhaps it is not far-fetched to say that in the characterization of Cao Cao there are ingredients from Zhu Yuanzhang and Zhu Di. In their treatment of scholar-officials, these early Ming emperors appeared to be a Legalistic antithesis to the Mencian ideal of the benevolent ruler. To that extent they indeed bore some resemblance to the novelistic figure of Cao Cao. Among other things in the novel, the palace physician Ji Ping's defiant denouncement of Cao Cao as traitor and usurper and Cao's brutal tortures of Ji—including cutting off his fingers and tongue before putting him to death and dismembering his body (SGZTSYY, 2:757–63)—are strongly reminiscent of what happened between Zhu Di and the Jianwen loyalists, especially Fang Xiaoru.<sup>78</sup> The pro-Shu and anti-Wei stance in *Three Kingdoms*, therefore, may be more than just an inheritance from the novel's antecedents in popular sources or historiographies. The literati sentiments of the novelist's own time could have exerted a shaping influence on the depiction of the major characters.

Throughout Chinese imperial history, prime ministers, or *zaixiang*, were often representative figures of the educated elite, especially since the famous motto by Emperor Taizu of the Song: “It should take a scholar to be a prime minister” (*Zaixiang xiyong dushuren*).<sup>79</sup> As a result, the personal relationship between the emperor and the prime minister could be a barometer of the relationship between the imperial power and the literati. While the official title of the prime minister differed from one dynasty to the next, the man in that position was in most cases the most important aide to the emperor and top administrator of the state. “The empire was not to be governed only by one man,” as Huang Zongxi put it, “and official positions were set up to govern it. Officials were, therefore, surrogates of the sovereign.”<sup>80</sup> By this observation, Huang Zongxi explains the origin of the institution of civil officialdom, including the position of the prime minister itself. While the emperor always possessed unchallengeable authority, the prime minister, if he was a scholar, could sometimes serve as some kind of a buffer between the throne and civil bureaucracy.

During the thirteen years between the founding of the Ming and Zhu Yuanzhang’s annulment of the office of *zaixiang* in 1380, there were as many as twenty-three men who were placed in that position, starting with Xu Da (1332–85). Yet only three of them played any substantial roles, namely, Li Shanchang (1314–90), Wang Guangyang (?–1379), and Hu Weiyong.<sup>81</sup> All three ended up executed by Emperor Hongwu. Li Shanchang lived in his native Dingyuan after his retirement in 1371, but his implication in the Hu Weiyong case led to his execution in 1390. Wang Guangyang was in the office for two years before he was demoted to a local position in the south and then put to death there. Hu Weiyong, who climbed all the way from the position of county magistrate to the very top of bureaucratic hierarchy, was the prime minister from 1373 to 1380, longer than either Li or Wang.

The crimes Hu Weiyong was charged with included “recruiting Japanese pirates” for a possible coup d’état and “acknowledging allegiance in correspondence to the heir apparent of the Yuan,” neither of which could be substantiated.<sup>82</sup> Yet Hu’s abuse of power and practice of nepotism and bribe-taking had been no secret among the top officials. Several of them, including Xu Da, had memorialized Zhu Yuanzhang about Hu’s misdeeds. Even before he appointed Hu the prime minister, the emperor had received counsel from Liu Ji (1311–75), a sagacious scholar and strate-



gist, that Hu was absolutely no material for the top administrative post.<sup>83</sup> Evidently, Zhu Yuanzhang, usually observant and perceptive, was fully aware that Hu was not the right choice. So why did the emperor not only go ahead with the appointment of Hu but also retain him in the position for so long? The most convincing answer is that Zhu Yuanzhang deliberately made Hu the prime minister in order to create a pretext for his eventual abolition of the top civil service position, which proved a crucial step toward his autocracy.<sup>84</sup>

Huang Zongxi considered all the ill governance during much of the Ming period a consequence of the annulment of the position of prime minister.<sup>85</sup> Whether that assessment was accurate or not, it was true that Zhu Yuanzhang's decision had a tremendous impact on Ming political culture. During the rest of the Hongwu years and the entire Yongle reign, the Six Ministries (*liu bu*) reported directly to the emperor, and the so-called Grand Secretariat (*neige*) was little more than a rubber stamp. Without the protection of a prime minister's prominence and prestige, scholar-officials became much more vulnerable to the politically aggressive eunuchs, and consequently the civil bureaucracy was significantly weakened. To be sure, the status of the *neige* was to be raised later in the dynasty, eventually paving the road for the advent of the powerful grand councilor, Zhang Juzheng, who steered the state for about a decade under an adolescent Emperor Wanli. In general, however, the abolition of the prime minister's office further changed the balance of power between the throne and the intellectual elite. If the office of the prime minister as the top scholar-official had served as a symbol of the cooperation between the imperial power and the scholar-gentry, the removal of that symbol institutionalized the throne's monopoly of political power.

It may not have been a mere coincidence that *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, with its depiction of "a wise ruler and a worthy prime minister" (*mingjun xianxiang*), came into existence at a historical moment that witnessed neither a wise ruler nor a worthy prime minister. Drawing upon the Mencian ideal of political sovereignty, the novel's presentation of the Liu Bei-Zhuge Liang relationship may be best appreciated in the context of the early Ming political situation, including the suppression of *Mencius* and the abolition of the office of the prime minister. It was a time when the literati craved a ruler that would fully appreciate their worth and a powerful and sagacious scholar-official to represent their interests. The fictional

depiction of Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang may have been romanticized with an imagination that catered to that yearning.

Indeed, the literati's wish to negotiate with political power in order to regain some of their lost dignity found many literary expressions. In the fourteenth-century popular narrative (*pinghua*) *King Wu's Expedition Against King Zhou* (Wu Wang fa Zhou shu) and the sixteenth-century novel *Creation of the Gods* (Fengshen yanyi), for instance, King Wen of the Zhou has to humble himself in repeated visits to Jiang Ziya before successfully soliciting the service of the wise strategist, an episode that bears remarkable affinity to that of Liu Bei's three visits to Zhuge Liang in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. In several of the fifteenth-century chatefables (*chihua*) and late Ming novels that center on the Song judge Bao Zheng, the righteous and resourceful scholar-official is depicted as being able to punish the emperor's kinsmen for their wrongdoings despite intervention from the sovereign himself.<sup>86</sup> Yet nowhere is the literati's yearning for a strengthened position in their interaction with the imperial state more intensely expressed than in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. When the emperors of the early Ming wielded absolute political power, the literati sought sanctuary in the fictional world of a historical novel, where they found in the tandem of a wise ruler and a worthy prime minister the best embodiment of the Mencian ideal of political sovereignty.