re Wade-Giles W&F, Week 12

Hsia

CHAPTER II

THE ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS

The Romance of the Three Kingdoms is by design a historical narrative rather than a historical novel as we understand the term in the West. Hardly a single character in the book is ahistorical, and there is no plot to speak of beyond the plot of history. Though it borrows from the oral tradition of storytelling, it is clearly far more an epic than a romance (to borrow the distinction maintained in W. P. Ker's still useful book, *Epic and Romance*), in that its drama of human motivation is rarely adulterated by other independent kinds of narrative interest to be found in knightly and amatory adventure, in pageantry and fantasy.[1] Finical scholars from the Ch'ing historian Chang Hsüeh-ch'eng to Hu Shih, it is true, have complained that it is neither sufficiently truthful to be good history nor sufficiently fictionalized to be good literature.[2] To complain so, however, is to disregard the peculiar strengths and limitations of the *yen-i* type of fiction of which *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is the first and greatest example: it attains the condition of good literature precisely because its slight fictional elaboration of history has restored for us the actuality of history. The work contains, to be sure, occasional minor episodes patently fictitious and unworthy of the name of history. Yet in comparison with a great many other Chinese historical novels or with the pseudohistorical epics of the Renaissance, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is remarkably chaste in its supernaturalism and restrained in its use of folk material. By and large it is a sober drama of political and military contention of about a hundred years' duration (A.D. 168–265) among rival power groups bidding for control of the Chinese empire.

Long before Lo Kuan-chung (*ca.* 1330–1400) compiled *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in the late Yuan or early Ming period, its major characters and events had been romanticized by poets, storytellers, and playwrights so that their influence could not but be felt in his work. Yet Lo's main intention was to abide by history as he knew it and to reject palpable fiction. Though for the earlier attempts at historical fiction, which are nothing but inept compilations of oral material, we should properly emphasize their popular, folk quality rather than their individual authorship, *San-kuo-chih yen-i* represents a major breakthrough for the Chinese novel in that it is a unified piece of work by a single author which is intentionally corrective of the narrative crudities and superstitious excesses of the storytellers. The Three Kingdoms period had been a major subject for historical storytellers at least since the late T'ang. Though they followed the main events of the period, in catering to their unlearned audience they must in time have exaggerated the traits of certain beloved and detested characters and added a wealth of fanciful and interpretative fiction until the retold cycle of stories departed quite far from official history. There is an extant compilation of such stories dating from the Yuan period entitled *San-kuo-chih p'ing-hua*.[3] This version is atrocious in style and often transcribes the names of places and persons in wrong characters. Events are narrated most sketchily and

history itself is reduced to a contest in magic, cunning, and prowess. Insofar as other preserved *p'ing-hua* are less illiterate, it is possible that the publishers in this instance had entrusted the task of compilation to a hack of little learning and less writing ability. Based on promptbooks of provincial storytellers, it could not have represented the art of storytelling among its famous practitioners in the capital cities. But with all its uncharacteristic crudities, this version must have conformed to their repertoire in one respect at least: the application of the theory of moral retribution to the workings of history. According to this source, the ultimate split of the Han empire into three kingdoms is directly traceable to the founding emperor Kao-tsu's unjust execution of his three able generals: Han Hsin, P'eng Yüeh, and Ying Pu.[4] In time these three are reborn as the founders of the three kingdoms: Han Hsin as Ts'ao Ts'ao (Wei), P'eng Yüeh as Liu Pei (Shu), and Ying Pu as Sun Ch'üan (Wu). Kao-tsu and his cruel wife, Empress Lü, also return to earth as the last Han emperor Hsien-ti and his consort Empress Fu, to suffer endless torment in the hands of Ts'ao Ts'ao.

Lo Kuan-chung does away with all this kind of didactic nonsense. In fact, he is so intent on retelling history that the earliest preserved version of his *San kuo* (the so-called Hung-chih edition, actually published in the Chia-ching period, 1522–66) begins without rhetorical flourish of any kind:

> Upon the death of Huan-ti of the Later Han, Ling-ti succeeded to the throne. He was then twelve years old. At court Grand General Tou Wu, Grand Tutor Ch'en Fan, and Minister of Public Instruction Hu Kuang gave him counsel and assistance. The ninth month of that autumn, the palace eunuchs Ts'ao Chieh and Wang Fu arrogated power. Tou Wu and Ch'en Fan plotted their death, but their plot leaked out and they themselves were killed by Ts'ao Chieh and Wang Fu. From then on the palace eunuchs became powerful.[5]

In its complete independence of the oral conventions, the passage recalls the terse style of official dynastic history and makes few concessions in the direction of a more popular narrative. By contrast,

the *p'ing-hua* version begins as follows, after four lines of introductory verse:

> In the days of long ago, there lived Liu Hsiu of White Water Village, in Teng-chou of the commandery of Nan-yang. His courtesy name was Wen-shu. His posthumous title was Emperor Kuang-wu. "Kuang" indicates the light of sun and moon illuminating all under heaven; "wu" indicates his winning an empire by military force. Hence his posthumous title was Kuang-wu. His capital was erected in Loyang. During the fifth year of his reign, one day in a moment of leisure, he visited the Imperial Park. . . .[6]

The passage betrays its oral origin by its attempt to explain the title "Kuang-wu." In a text specifically prepared for reading, these two simple characters would have needed no explanation; moreover, an educated reader would have been insulted by the author's officiousness. After laboriously establishing his identity, the *p'ing-hua* version then tells how Kuang-wu meets at the park one Ssu-ma Chung-hsiang, who is later transported to hell to preside over the case of the three wronged generals. Ssu-ma Chung-hsiang, in turn, becomes Ssu-ma Chung-ta, better known as Ssu-ma I, the founder of the Chin dynasty. We are given a typical folk tale with no pretense to being serious history.

The Lo Kuan-chung version as revised by Mao Tsung-kang and his father Mao Lun, which has been the standard version of *San kuo* for over three hundred years, also begins differently. A summary of Chinese history now precedes the story of the powerful eunuchs at Ling-ti's court:

> Empires wax and wane; states cleave asunder and coalesce. When the rule of Chou weakened seven contending principalities sprang up, warring one with another till they settled down as Ch'in and when its destiny had been fulfilled arose Ch'u and Han to contend for the mastery. And Han was the victor. . . .[7]

Thus in conformity with the style of popular historical novels, the editors have introduced a preamble to lessen *San kuo's* dissimilarity to that genre of fiction.

It has been the fashion among modern Chinese scholars to question the information given in prefaces to most editions of Chinese novels. Actually, in the case of carefully printed editions, this skepticism is often uncalled for: the baffling nature of some prefatory statements merely reflects our lack of more accurate knowledge about authors, editors, and printers. The Chia-ching edition of *San kuo* was prepared with extreme care, and its bibliographical and prefatory material accordingly deserves our close attention. Its full title is *San-kuo-chih t'ung-su yen-i* (An explanation of the *San-kuo-chih,* done in the popular style). Ch'en Shou, the compiler of the official *San-kuo-chih,* is given equal credit with Lo Pen (courtesy name, Kuan-chung), the author who has prepared this popular version from Ch'en's history. There is a 41-page name index of all historical characters appearing in the book. Though by Lo Kuan-chung's time Shu Han had long supplanted Wei as the legitimate successor to the Han dynasty and appropriately occupies the place of honor in the index, the personages of each state are listed in the order observed in the table of contents for that state in Ch'en Shou's history. Most important, this edition has a preface by Chiang Ta-ch'i, which gives the *raison d'être* for Lo Kuan-chung's popularization:

> The former dynasties saw the rise of *p'ing-hua* based on unreliable history and recited by blind storytellers. Such *p'ing-hua,* characterized by their contemptible and erroneous language and their retelling of wild fiction, were detested by gentlemen-scholars. Lo Kuan-chung of Tung-yuan, however, basing his account on Ch'en Shou, consulted official history and carefully adapted and expanded its chronicle of events from the first year of the Chung-p'ing reign of Han Ling-ti to the first year of the T'ai-k'ang reign of the Chin dynasty. He called it *An Explanation of the San-kuo-chih, Done in the Popular Style.* Its language is neither too difficult nor too vulgar. It records events truthfully so that it should be properly deemed history.[8]

Even though not all scholars are prepared to accept this quotation at face value, yet the sharp contrast between the illiterate *p'ing-hua* and the eminently readable and reliable *yen-i* version would support the conclusion that Lo Kuan-chung was writing in conscious departure from the tradition of the storytellers rather than in imitation of them. His novel was popular literature with a difference, compiled by a scholar and carrying forward the historiographical tradition of Ssu-ma Ch'ien and Ssu-ma Kuang. As a matter of fact, several Ming publishers of *San kuo* and other *yen-i* novels announce these works as adaptations from Ssu-ma Kuang's comprehensive history, with the phrase *an Ch'ien* (According to *Tzu-chih t'ung-chien*) duly incorporated in their titles.[9]

Lo Kuan-chung is extremely fortunate in that his source, Ch'en Shou's *San kuo chih,* is rich in historical and biographical detail. One is used to the idea of the voluminousness of Chinese dynastic histories; yet, with all the records at their disposal, most official historians are actually too concise to fully capture the personalities of the historical figures they are dealing with. Though superior to later histories, Ch'en Shou's *San kuo chih* is less copious in detail and less dramatic in style than Ssu-ma Ch'ien's *Records,* but its relative terseness is early complemented by a lengthy commentary by P'ei Sung-chih of the Liu Sung period (420–78), who sees as his task the inclusion of all relevant passages from other sources to illuminate the text. Drawing upon some 210 titles, most of which have long since been lost, P'ei Sung-chih therefore preserves twice the amount of material included in the history proper; most of this material dates from Ch'en Shou's time (the third century) and has as much claim to reliability. Some of these sources are written from a definite point of view; thus, the biography of Ts'ao Ts'ao known as *Ts'ao Man chuan* includes many interesting episodes that are derogatory in intention though their maliciousness does not necessarily preclude their truth. In compiling his novel, Lo Kuan-chung draws as much from P'ei as from Ch'en, apparently proceeding on the assumption that all this material is worthy of elaboration. It may appear as a weakness that he does not have the modern historian's sophistication or passion for consistency. Yet, whereas a modern biographer like Lytton Strachey inevitably introduces a note of falsity in his ironic concern for a consistent image, Lo Kuan-

chung, in his apparent failure to discriminate among his sources, ultimately attains a remarkably impersonal objectivity in his recreation of a complex age.

In compiling his novel, Lo Kuan-chung had also to accept certain myths that were too well entrenched in the popular mind to be rejected, such as the sworn brotherhood of Liu Pei, Kuan Yü, and Chang Fei; the extraordinary nobility of Kuan Yü; and the supernatural wisdom of Liu Pei's chief counselor, Chu-ko Liang. These myths, however, were themselves developed from hints in the official history, and their inclusion in the novel dramatizes the history without falsifying it to any serious extent. Thus the sworn brotherhood of Liu, Kuan, and Chang confirms rather than contradicts the genuinely fraternal relations between the Shu leader and his comrades-in-arms; Kuan Yü's undoubted nobility lends poignancy to his folly and arrogance; and, with the possible exception of one important episode, Chu-ko Liang's supernatural powers only embellish his career without contributing to the impression that his wizardry is essential to his success.

Because of the compiler's eclectic inclusion of a diversity of materials, it is very easy to misread *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Careless readers would form their impression of the major characters, say Ts'ao Ts'ao and Kuan Yü, on the strength of a few dramatic and unambiguous scenes and then maintain that it is indeed the compiler's conscious intention to vilify one and ennoble the other. While agreeing with this simplistic view of the major characters, more careful readers would notice scenes where they are presented in a different light. Thus Hu Shih, who, incidentally, subscribes to the view that the novel came about through a slow process of evolution, maintains that *San kuo* is an inconsistent narrative:

> The authors of *San-kuo yen-i*, its revisers and final editor were all provincial Confucians of ordinary intelligence; they were not literary geniuses or exceptional thinkers. They did their level best to portray Chu-ko Liang. But they had a preconceived notion that Chu-ko Liang's great forte lies in his "resourceful plotting and strategy"; so in their hands he eventually became a Taoist magician of divine intuition and wonderful calculation who could summon winds and propitiate the stars. They further wanted to portray Liu Pei as a man of benevolence and righteousness but ended in making him a coward of no ability. Again, they wanted to portray a Kuan Yü of divine prowess, but he was reduced to an arrogant and stupid warrior.[10]

What Hu Shih seems to be doing here is testing the book against the popular conceptions of three beloved characters and deploring its lack of success in embodying these conceptions. While, in line with Chu Hsi and the succeeding historians, Lo Kuan-chung shows evident sympathy for the cause of Shu and regards it as the legitimate successor to the Han dynasty, it would be extremely naïve to suppose that he had indeed preconceived its founding heroes in a simple-minded fashion. For most Chinese, of course, it is very easy to misread the novel since they have been conditioned by the popular theater and the storytellers to accept unquestioningly the benevolence of Liu Pei, the wizardry of Chu-ko Liang, and the divine bravery of Kuan Yü. Furthermore, in the version then available to Hu Shih—the standard version edited by Mao Tsung-kang—minor stylistic changes have been introduced to ensure the reader's sympathy for these heroes. But even in that edition the version of Lo Kuan-chung has remained substantially intact and no one should have been misled by the thin veneer of flattery.

Take Kuan Yü, a most misunderstood character. To any unbiased reader it must be quite apparent that Lo Kuan-chung has adopted, not inadvertently or perfunctorily but deliberately, Ch'en Shou's view of the hero as a haughty warrior deficient in generalship. Lo Kuan-chung was writing at a time when Kuan Yü was already an object of national veneration (he was to become a god in Ch'ing times) and so he accords him all the reverence merited by a saint. He duly notes his imposing looks and martial stature, his long beard and mighty sword, and, whenever justified, impresses us with his surpassing bravery and extreme nobility. But at the same time he gives history its due by noting in instance after instance his sheer ignorance of policy, his childish vanity and unbearable conceit.

And this conceit, abetted by general credulity, eventually brings about his downfall. He dies a shattered idol deserving some pity because of his invincible belief in his own sagacity and prowess.

Far from producing a discordant impression, as Hu Shih would suggest, the mythical and historical strands of Kuan Yü's character are consistently interwoven to produce an impression of organic unity. The author makes it quite clear that both his strengths and his weaknesses stem from his extreme pride and self-confidence. He underscores this point in describing Kuan Yü's initial deed of valor that so impresses the assembled nobles and rebel leaders in their expedition against their common enemy, Tung Cho. They are temporarily at a loss before the unexpected might of Tung Cho's general, Hua Hsiung:

> Yuan Shao said, "What a pity that my top generals, Yen Liang and Wen Ch'ou, are not here. If one of them were here, we shouldn't be afraid of Hua Hsiung."
>
> He had not yet finished when a man strode from the last row of the assembly to the front, facing the leaders on the platform. He cried loudly, "May I volunteer to take Hua Hsiung's head and present it to you!" They all looked at the speaker. Standing there was a man nine feet tall with a two-foot-long beard. He had phoenix eyes and silkworm eyebrows. His face was the color of a jujube, and his voice had the resonance of a large bell. Yuan Shao wondered who he could be. Kung-sun Tsan replied, "This is the younger brother of Liu Hsüan-te, Kuan Yü."
>
> "And what kind of position does he have?"
>
> "He is in the train of Liu Hsüan-te as a mounted archer."
>
> From his place Yuan She roared, "What effrontery to suggest that we nobles have no able generals! A mere archer, how can he speak like this before us? Throw him out of here."
>
> Ts'ao Ts'ao hurriedly intervened, "Kung-lu, cease your anger. Since this man has made this boast, he must be skilled in arms and strategy. Let him try. If he fails, then you may punish him." Yuan Shao said, "Hua Hsiung will surely laugh at us if we send a mere archer to fight him." Ts'ao said, "He looks no common person. How could Hua Hsiung know he is an archer?" Kuan Yü said, "If I fail, you may behead me."

> As Kuan Yü was getting ready for the battlefield, Ts'ao Ts'ao poured a cup of hot wine and offered it to him. Kuan Yü said, "Leave the cup here; I'll be back and drink it soon enough." Then he left the tent with his long sword in his hand and vaulted into the saddle. The nobles soon heard from outside the pass the fierce roll of drums and the loud yelling of troops as if the sky were falling and the earth were shaking under the impact of the tearing down of mountains. They were all seized with fear. They were about to send messengers out to get the news when, amid the tinkling of bells, Kuan Yü rode toward the center of the tent, the head of Hua Hsiung held aloft in his hand. He threw it on the ground, and the wine in the cup was still warm. In later times it is sung:
>
> His might impressing heaven and earth, his first deed of valor
> Was heard at the tent gate amid the roll of battle drums.
> Yün-ch'ang declined the wine cup until he should have displayed his might
> And the wine was still warm when Hua Hsiung was slain.[11]

In this scene the author has refrained from describing the actual encounter between the two warriors so that Kuan Yü's celerity in making good his boast may make a deeper impression upon the leaders assembled at the tent, as it does upon the reader. Initially, the leaders are divided in their reactions to his boast: his impressive features and carriage are definitely in his favor but his humble position speaks for his extreme insolence. The exchange of words among three of these leaders—Yuan Shao, Yuan She, Ts'ao Ts'ao—may not seem impressive until one realizes that each speaks entirely in character and that it is these small scenes of dialogue that build up the cumulative impression of the realness of the major characters. A vain aristocrat, Yuan She shows his utter contempt for the plebeian upstart. Yuan Shao is not as rude as his younger brother; in fact, he has always cultivated an image of hospitality so that, until he suffers utter defeat in the hands of Ts'ao Ts'ao many years later, he enjoys the reputation of a great leader with a following of distinguished counselors and generals. In the present scene his characteristic weakness is shown in the fact that, while he himself is

willing to try Kuan Yü, he fears the ridicule of the opponent. Ts'ao Ts'ao eventually vanquishes the Yuan brothers, and in this scene his superior judgment is already apparent in his confidence in a man of ability, whatever his origin.

But Ts'ao Ts'ao may have been overimpressed. If in the present scene the author secures for his hero a strong impression of self-confidence and bravery, he at the same time may have hinted at a possible weakness in his eagerness to impress people. As we read on, we are introduced to more tableaux of this sort, with Kuan Yü keeping night vigil outside the bedchamber of Liu Pei's wives to avoid any hint of a scandal, charging down a hill to kill a general who under normal circumstances would have been his superior in armed combat, swiftly dispatching another enemy general to prove his innocence before the incredulous Chang Fei, and calmly playing a game of *go* while a physician operates on his poisoned arm.[12] With his undoubted courage and his long streak of good luck, he acts with increasing arrogance and haughtiness to sustain his public image, not realizing that even in his prime there are at least a dozen generals who are his equal in armed combat and that in military strategy and statesmanship he is a mere bungler. It is his tragedy that he eventually takes his appearance for his reality.

Few in the novel are indeed privileged to see behind Kuan Yü's appearance—so great is his fame and so impressive his long string of heroic deeds. Ts'ao Ts'ao, who was initially so taken by his valor, remains his lifelong admirer. During Kuan Yü's temporary stay with him, he tries his hardest to win his friendship and alienate him from Liu Pei, but his efforts only provide our hero ample opportunity to prove his unshakable loyalty to his elder brother. But among all his awed spectators there is one dispassionate observer: Chu-ko Liang. And this makes all the difference in our understanding of Kuan Yü. If Ts'ao Ts'ao, a shrewd judge of character and talent so far as his own men are concerned, often appears as a romantic admirer of Liu Pei's top generals—Kuan Yü, Chang Fei, Chao Yün—Chu-ko Liang is their commander who has to evaluate their abilities realistically. The glamor of their heroism can not win

battles for him. Moreover, to Kuan Yü and Chang Fei, Chu-ko Liang initially appears as an intruder into the intimate circle of the sworn brothers, and he has to humor their peevish acts of noncooperation to win their confidence.[13] From the first, then, he sees Kuan Yü and Chang Fei as spoiled children jealous of his sudden eminence rather than legendary heroes, and in his own mind there is no doubt that he prefers Chao Yün—brave, cool-headed, nontemperamental, and a military strategist in his own right—as the ablest general under his command. He keeps him by his side on every military expedition and entrusts him with the most delicate or difficult assignments. After long years of distinguished service, Chao Yün dies in his old age, and on hearing the news Chu-ko Liang stamps his feet and cries, "Alas, Tzu-lung is dead! The state has lost one of its pillars and I have lost an arm."[14] (Chao Yün is such a beloved character in the novel that one is shocked to find in Ch'en Shou's history that he was actually ranked the last of the five "Tiger Generals" in the Shu state—after Kuan Yü, Chang Fei, Ma Ch'ao, Huang Chung. He is so ranked in the *p'ing-hua* version, but in the Mao Tsung-kang edition he is ranked third.)[15] For a contrast, upon the death of Kuan Yü, Chu-ko Liang merely advises the grief-stricken Liu Pei, "My lord, please restrain your sorrow. It is said that birth and death are all controlled by fate. Kuan Yü brought this disaster upon himself by his harshness and haughtiness. You must now take care of your health and slowly deliberate revenge."[16] Any sign of personal emotion is conspicuously absent.

Yet the phrase *kang erh tzu chin* (harsh and haughty) is not of the novelist's coinage; it is taken from Ch'en Shou's final evaluation of Kuan Yü's career[17] and is here dramatically attributed to Chu-ko Liang to reinforce a point which the novelist has been making all along despite his deference to popular esteem for the hero. In one of the subtlest scenes (chapter 63) Chu-ko Liang scrutinizes Kuan Yü's fitness for the vital post of governor of Ching-chou. Even before Kuan P'ing, the foster son of Kuan Yü, brings the news, Chu-ko Liang has foreknown from a star's fall from the sky the

untimely death of the counselor P'ang T'ung, which would necessitate his departure for Szechwan:

A few days later, while Chu-ko K'ung-ming was sitting with Kuan Yün-ch'ang and a few others, it was reported that Kuan P'ing had arrived. All present were alarmed. Kuan P'ing came in and submitted a letter from Liu Pei. K'ung-ming read that on the seventh day of the seventh month this year Counselor P'ang was trapped by Chang Jen at Fallen Phoenix Slope and fatally shot with arrows. K'ung-ming wailed, and not a one present did not shed tears. Then K'ung-ming said, "Since our lord is hemmed in at the P'ei Pass and can neither advance nor retreat, I must go there to help him." Yün-ch'ang asked, "If you leave, who will guard Ching-chou? Ching-chou is a vital region and concerns us all." K'ung-ming said, "Our lord has not written plainly, but I know what was in his mind." Then he showed the letter to the others and said, "The letter entrusts me with the defense of the region and I am to find one equal to the task. But since he asked Kuan P'ing to be his messenger, I understand him to have Yüan-ch'ang in mind as the man to take over this important job. And I know Yün-ch'ang will do his best to safeguard this area to honor the pledge taken long ago at the peach garden. But the responsibility is not a light one, and may you always do your best."

Yün-ch'ang accepted with alacrity. Then K'ung-ming ordered a special banquet at which the seal of office was to be handed to him.

"All the future rests with you, general," said K'ung-ming as he raised the seal to hand it over to him. Yün-ch'ang replied, "When a man of honor accepts such a task, he is only released by death." The word "death" displeased K'ung-ming. He was thinking of not handing the seal to him, but then his word had gone forth. He went on, "Now if Ts'ao Ts'ao attacks, what would you do?" Yün-ch'ang answered, "Repel him with all my strength." "But if Ts'ao Ts'ao and Sun Ch'üan both attack you, what then?" Yün-ch'ang replied, "Repel them both." K'ung-ming said, "In that case Ching-chou would be endangered. I have eight words for you, and if you remember them, Ching-chou will be safe." "What eight words?" asked Yün-ch'ang. "North, repel Ts'ao; south, ally with Sun Ch'üan." "These words I will engrave in my heart," replied Yün-ch'ang.[18]

One notices here the extreme reluctance with which Chu-ko Liang hands over the seal of office. Blinded by love, Liu Pei cannot see Kuan Yü's unfitness for the post, but as a counselor with no personal ambition, Chu-ko Liang cannot but agree to his choice. Despite the advice that is supposedly engraved in his heart, Kuan Yü soon spurns friendly overtures from Sun Ch'üan and incurs his enmity. Under the combined attack of Sun and Ts'ao, he eventually forfeits his life and loses the region of Ching-chou. His tragic folly spells the beginning of the downfall of the Shu state.

Soon after being appointed governor of Ching-chou, Kuan Yü becomes highly incensed over the fact that Ma Ch'ao, who has only recently joined the Shu forces, has been made a top general with the title *P'ing-hsi* (Pacification of the west). So he sends word to Liu Pei through Kuan P'ing that he is desirous of entering a tournament with Ma Ch'ao to test who is the better warrior. This episode is found in Ch'en Shou's biography of Kuan Yü, and Lo Kuan-chung has only slightly enlarged it. On receiving the message, Liu Pei is naturally shocked:

K'ung-ming said, "Don't worry. I will personally compose a reply." Afraid that Yün-ch'ang would get impatient, Liu Pei asked K'ung-ming to compose one right away. Then he gave it to Kuan P'ing and made him return to Ching-chou without delay.

P'ing returned to Ching-chou. Yün-ch'ang asked, "I want to have a contest with Ma Ch'ao, did you mention that?" P'ing replied, "Here's a letter from our military commander." Yün-ch'ang opened it and read:

"I understand you are anxious to have a contest with Ma Meng-ch'i. In my estimation, though Meng-ch'i is unusually brave, he is but of the class of Ying Pu and P'eng Yüeh. It is fitting that he should compete with Yi-te [Chang Fei] but surely he cannot approach your unrivaled excellence. Now you are given the grave charge of Ching-chou. If you come to Szechwan and if in the meantime something happens in Ching-chou, would you not be guilty of a terrible crime? I think you will see this."

After finishing the letter, Yün-ch'ang stroked his beard and said with a satisfied smile, "K'ung-ming knows me thoroughly." He circulated

the letter among his retainers and thought no more of going to Szechwan.[19]

This episode, like the preceding one, adds immensely to the portrait of Kuan Yü. It is only his extreme vanity that could have prevented him from detecting the palpable flattery in the letter. He really believes that Chu-ko Liang sets him apart even from his brother Chang Fei.

Kuan Yü's downfall and death are recounted in some of the finest chapters of the novel (chaps. 74–77). An aging warrior, he is reaching the pinnacle of his fame but also exhibiting the most impossible haughtiness and folly. Luck once more prevails in his vanquishment of P'ang Te, a fierce Wei general determined to destroy his reputation and expose it as a lie, and in his capture of P'ang Te's cowardly commander, Yü Chin. But Kuan Yü proves no match for a man of true cunning, the Wu commander Lü Meng. His forces disintegrate under the combined attack of Wei and Wu, but he remains a hero of desolate grandeur as for the last time he breaks out of the enemy's encirclement to face his capture and death.

In my presentation of Kuan Yü's character, I have tried to demonstrate the care with which Lo Kuan-chung has used his sources to compile his novel. It is simply not true, as Hu Shih has alleged, that he conceived a Kuan Yü of "divine prowess" and then bungled the job by turning him into an "arrogant and stupid" warrior. The arrogance and simple-mindedness are essential to Lo's concept of a hero cursed with the tragic disease of hubris; without this flaw, a storybook hero of divine prowess would have been insufferable. By the cumulative use of telling detail, Lo Kuan-chung has blended the historical and folkloristic concepts of the hero and made him into something truly memorable.

Not all characters are as self-conscious about fame as Kuan Yü, but even the minor heroes are determined to play a part in history. Roy A. Miller has rightly called *San kuo* "a fascinating novel whose chief theme is the nature of human ambition."[20] But in their own eyes, the major protagonists are concerned not so much with ambition as with the achievement of fame. Theirs is a secular world conditioned by the Confucian and Legalist philosophy of public service in which a man's greatest satisfaction is to achieve the kind of fame commensurate with his ability and talent and thus earn a place in history. In periods of dynastic stability, ambitious men can do little more than climb the ladder of bureaucratic success. But in turbulent times, such as the period of the Three Kingdoms, opportunities for men of ambition are limitless; hence nearly all the more interesting historical novels are about periods of dynastic transition when the ultimate prize for success is nothing less than the imperial crown.[21] In *San kuo,* one watches during the earlier stages of the historical struggle the ruthless elimination of the unqualified leaders until there remain only three, the founders of Wei, Wu, and Shu. They have succeeded because they have attracted the best men to their service, but at the same time men of equal talent who could have risen higher if they had chosen the right leader often go down with their fallen master. When Sun Ch'üan succeeds to the throne of Wu upon the untimely death of his elder brother Sun Ts'e, Chou Yü persuades Lu Su to serve the new ruler by quoting the words of a famous general, Ma Yuan, to Emperor Kuang-wu, "At times like this, it is not only the ruler who seeks his ministers, but also the ministers who seek their ruler."[22] In *San kuo,* therefore, one watches the ups and downs of many a man of ability who seeks to advance his fortune with his chosen master. In his untried years he may transfer his allegiance but, once committed to a lord, his honor dictates his faithful service to the bitter end. For many potentially great counselors and generals, their fate often lies with their initial choice.

Ch'en Kung is an obvious case. He is a local magistrate who, impressed by Ts'ao Ts'ao's courage and nobility, gives up his post to follow him. But, immediately disillusioned by the latter's unscrupulousness, he later joins his lot with Lü Pu, an unprincipled weakling who, though the greatest warrior of his time, decisively lacks leadership. Also under him are a pair of traitors who eventually deliver him to Ts'ao Ts'ao. Ch'en Kung is captured, as well:

Then Hsü Huang led in Ch'en Kung. Ts'ao Ts'ao said, "I hope you have been well since we last saw each other, Kung-t'ai?"

Kung said, "I left you because your ways were crooked."

Ts'ao said, "I may have been crooked, but how could you have chosen Lü Pu, of all people?" Kung replied, "Though Pu is a fool, he is not deceitful and crafty like you." Ts'ao said, "You regard yourself as an able and shrewd man—how come you are reduced to this?" Turning to Lü Pu, Kung said, "To my dying regret, this fellow did not follow my advice. If he had done so, we would not have been caught." Then Ts'ao asked, "What shall I do with you now that you are captured?" Kung gave a loud reply, "There can be only death for me." Ts'ao said, "Very well, but what about your mother and family?" Kung replied, "I have heard that he who rules with due regard for filial piety does not harm a man's family and he who governs with benevolence does not cut off the sacrifices at a man's tomb. I place my mother and family therefore in your hands. But since I am your prisoner, please kill me quickly. I have no regrets."

Ts'ao Ts'ao had the intention of saving his life, but Kung walked straight down the stairs, repulsing the attendants who would stop him. With tears in his eyes, Ts'ao rose and followed him. But Kung never looked back at him. Ts'ao instructed his attendants, "Let his mother and family be taken to Hsü-tu and looked after. Those neglectful of this task are to be punished with decapitation." Kung heard him but still uttered no word. He stretched out his neck for the blow. All present shed tears at his execution. Ts'ao gave orders that his remains be honorably coffined and buried in Hsü-tu.[23]

Not only scholars, but military men also undergo tribulations in their quest for a master properly appreciative of their ability. At first a minor officer in the service of Yuan Shao, Chao Yün later joins Kung-sun Tsan, who is also not much of a leader. Then Liu Pei, while a guest at Kung-sun Tsan's place, spots Chao Yün, and they take to each other. When Liu Pei has to depart from Kung-sun's headquarters, he says farewell to Chao Yün:

> They held each other's hands. With tears streaming down their cheeks, they could not bear to part. Yün said with a sigh, "Formerly I mistook Kung-sun Tsan for a hero. Judging from his actions, I can now see he is no different from the likes of Yuan Shao." Hsüan-te said, "For the present serve him with patience. We shall surely meet again." They parted in tears.[24]

Soon afterwards Liu Pei borrows Chao Yün from Kung-sun Tsan and further cements their bond. After the death of Kung-sun, therefore, Chao Yün wanders about in search of Liu Pei, then down on his fortune and leading a most unsettled life. They finally meet, soon after Liu Pei's reunion with Kuan Yü and Chang Fei:

> Hsüan-te was overjoyed and told Chao Yün all that had happened to him since they parted and so did Kuan Yü. Said Hsüan-te, "Tzu-lung, I was drawn to you the first time I saw you and did not want to part from you. I am very happy indeed to be with you again." Chao Yün said, "In all my wanderings, trying to find a lord worth serving, I have seen no one like you. Now that I am privileged to serve you, my life's ambition is fulfilled. I shall have no regret even if in serving you my brains are to be dashed out on the ground." [25]

Yet although his amiability and benevolence have attracted some able men to his side even during his darkest hour, Liu Pei is as yet no match for Ts'ao Ts'ao, who soon inflicts upon him a crushing defeat and reduces his forces to a mere thousand. Liu Pei feels keenly his repeated humiliations and confides to his followers his sense of shame that he should have involved them in his misfortune:

> All of you have talents fitting you to be chief ministers to a king; unfortunately you have followed Liu Pei. And my miserable fortune has involved you all. Today I have not a spot to call my own and I am afraid I have indeed ruined your chances for success. Why don't you all abandon me and go to some illustrious lord where you may be able to achieve great deeds and fame? [26]

It is at this juncture of events that Liu Pei begins his quest for Chu-ko Liang. Leaders have sought men of talent, and men of talent have sought leaders since the reign of Han Ling-ti. Yet no man of talent has been sought in as courteous a style and with as much desperate sincerity as Chu-ko Liang by Liu Pei. By the time Chu-ko arrives on the scene, Ts'ao Ts'ao has eliminated most of his rivals

in North and Central China; though he has not yet embarked on his expedition across the Yangtze River against Sun Ch'üan, he is practically assured of wiping out the puny forces of Liu Pei. Yet Chu-ko is to thwart the grand design of Ts'ao Ts'ao and establish the power balance of the three states. With sure artistic instinct, therefore, Lo Kuan-chung slows the pace of his narrative to introduce *the* hero of his book. His account of Liu Pei's three visits to Chu-ko in chapters 36–37 is justly celebrated.

Two aspects of Chu-ko Liang deserve special attention: his initial reluctance to serve and his undying loyalty to Liu Pei and his cause once he has so committed himself. I have mentioned that most protagonists of the novel are seekers after fame, but there is a special class of marginal characters—magicians, sorcerers, fortunetellers, physicians, and unconventional intellectuals too clever or too superior for their own good—who regularly tease and mock the fame-obsessed heroes. It may be that in compiling his romance Lo Kuan-chung feels duty-bound to include all men worthy of note who, though not directly involved in the political and military events of their time, have won reputation of a kind in official history and anecdotal literature. But it seems to me more a matter of design that the author periodically introduces these odd characters to provide a sardonic commentary on men immersed in politics. Like Oedipus, the ambitious heroes are all rationalists who disbelieve in supernatural signs and scorn prophetic mockery. Thus the dying Ts'ao Ts'ao would rather cast Hua T'o in prison than suffer having his brain operated on—he suspects that the wonder physician has been suborned to kill him.[27] Thus, even though the recent victim of a near-fatal ambush, Sun Ts'e takes vindictive pleasure in persecuting a rain maker and physician of divine efficacy simply out of contempt for his supernatural powers. He succeeds in having Yü Chi decapitated, but he himself is soon hounded to death by the unavenged spirit of the magician:

> That night there was a very violent storm and by morning Yü Chi's body had disappeared. The guards assigned to watch the corpse reported this to Sun Ts'e. In his wrath he wanted to kill them, but suddenly he saw someone calmly walking toward him in the hall, and on closer view it was Yü Chi. Highly enraged, he was about to draw his sword and slay him but all of a sudden he fainted and collapsed on the floor. His attendants hurriedly carried him to his bedchamber; eventually he recovered consciousness.
>
> His mother, the Dowager Wu, came to visit him and said, "My son, you have wrongly killed the holy one and this is your retribution."
>
> Ts'e smiled, "I have gone to battles with my father since I was a boy and have chopped down people as if they were hempen stalks. When have I received any retribution for this? Now that I have slain a sorcerer and put an end to his evil, how could I suffer any retribution on that score?" She said, "This has come about because you disbelieved in him. Now you must perform proper ceremonies to appease him." Ts'e replied, "My fate rests with heaven. A sorcerer cannot harm it, why appease him?" [28]

(In Ch'en Shou's history, Sun Ts'e dies solely of the wounds suffered during the ambush; another popular source tells of his being hounded to death by Yü Chi.[29] Lo Kuan-chung combines these two sources to produce a memorable portrait of a man who is fey. With his belief in fate Sun Ts'e is almost a stoic, but what he doesn't realize is that it is fate itself that has provoked his murderous rage against the popular rain maker.)

Even more interesting are the vignettes of intellectuals and writers who tempt fate with their futile display of wit and their open mockery of the powerful. As is well known, neo-Taoist "pure talk" was in fashion among the poets and wits at the Wei and later the Chin court. Though, as retainers to various members of the royal family, they are often involved in court intrigue, they at the same time affect a pure scorn for politics and politicians. *San kuo* has not given us a complete gallery of these intellectuals, but it does give glimpses of such men as K'ung Yung, Ni Heng, Yang Hsiu, Chang Sung, and Ho Yen.[30]

Among them, the most popular figure with readers of the novel is certainly Ni Heng, a scholar of high repute recommended to Ts'ao Ts'ao's attention by K'ung Yung, who is himself the senior member of the "Seven Wits of the Chien-an Period." During his

initial interview with Ts'ao Ts'ao, Ni Heng calls his best-known generals and counselors by scurrilous names and dismisses the rest of his followers as "clothes trees, rice baskets, wine caskets, and meat bags."

Ts'ao said angrily, "What abilities do you have then?" Heng answered, "I know all about heaven and earth, and am conversant in the three teachings and nine schools. Above, I could assist a king so that he may become Yao and Shun; as for myself, I match virtue with Confucius and Yen Hui. How could I be classed with ordinary scholars?"

There was only Chang Liao with them, and he was about to pull out his sword and kill him. But Ts'ao said, "I am just in need of a drummer to perform at court receptions, dinners, and sacrifices. Ni Heng may fill that post." Heng did not decline, said "yes," and left. Chang Liao asked, "This fellow is insolent, why don't you kill him?" Ts'ao answered, "He enjoys an undeserved reputation far and wide. If I kill him, the world will think that I am not hospitable to talent. Since he is so vain about his talent, I have made him a drummer to humiliate him."

Soon afterwards, Ts'ao was having a big banquet at the reception hall and the drummer was ordered to entertain. The former drummer told Heng, "When beating the drum, you must wear new clothes." But Heng arrived at the hall in his old clothes and beat the drum to the tune of "Three Variations on Yü-yang." The tone and rhythm were exquisite; the drum had a resonance like the notes from metal and stone. The audience was all moved to tears. But the attendants shouted at him, "Why didn't you change your clothes?" Facing all these people, Heng stripped his worn and tattered clothes and stood in his nakedness. His entire body was exposed to view. The guests all covered their faces. But Heng slowly put on his trousers, without changing color.

Ts'ao rebuked him, "In this ceremonial hall, how dare you be so insolent?" Heng replied, "To hoodwink and deceive the emperor, that's insolence! I expose the body my parents gave me—that's showing my purity." Ts'ao said, "If you are pure, then who is foul?" Heng said, "You cannot tell the virtuous and stupid apart—your eyes are foul; you haven't read the classics of *Poetry* and *History*—your mouth is foul; you don't listen to good advice—your ears are foul; you are ignorant of the past and present—your whole person is foul; you can't abide the other nobles—your belly is foul; you harbor thoughts of usurpation—your heart is foul. I am a scholar known all over the world and you use me as a drummer. This is like Yang Huo slighting Confucius and Tsang Ts'ang vilifying Mencius. You want to establish the work of a king or hegemon; then how could you so belittle me?" [31]

In Peking opera, Ni Heng is usually portrayed as a thoroughly sympathetic Confucian who rails at Ts'ao Ts'ao as a usurper and villain.[32] The same sympathy is observable in the present scene, but nevertheless the novelist also sees him as a comic figure with his completely naïve egotism and contempt for others. No Chinese in his right mind would compare himself to Confucius and Mencius, and yet Ni Heng unblushingly does so. He is a sort of Confucian beatnik whose scorn for Ts'ao Ts'ao hardly disguises an essential boorishness stemming from self-conceit.

Chu-ko Liang may seem a far cry from the likes of Yü Chi and Ni Heng. Yet initially, he and his friends at Nan-yang offer another, and more serious, kind of critique of the contending world of ambitious heroes. For they are the Taoist recluses, engaged in simple farming, singing songs of their own composition, visiting one another at leisure, or roaming among the hills. Their world is the traditional antithesis to the bureaucratic world—what every Chinese poet-bureaucrat longs for when overburdened with the cares of office. In describing Liu Pei's three visits to Chu-ko Liang, the novelist for the first and last time pays conspicuous attention to idyllic nature. When a good friend broaches the possibility of his serving Liu Pei, Chu-ko Liang dismisses him curtly with a Taoist question reminiscent of Chuang Tzu, "So you want to make me into an animal to be slaughtered at a sacrifice?" [33] Whereas other men of talent and ambition are eager for service, Chu-ko Liang shares with the marginal intellectuals and men of prophetic wisdom a mocking detachment from the political world. He seems extremely reluctant to leave his hermitage.

Or does he? So challenging are the times for men of talent that Chu-ko Liang, the supreme genius of his period, could not but be drawn to the call for personal achievement. He has early compared himself to Kuan Chung and Yüeh I, two eminent statesmen of the

pre-Ch'in period, and all his friends attest to his potential for unrivaled greatness. Oversubtle readers have read his slow response to Liu Pei's call as an elaborate preparation to enhance his own importance and win his future lord's complete trust. But, while his years at Nan-yang can be viewed as a period of preparation for the great task ahead of him, Chu-ko Liang is genuinely reluctant to embark on an active career because he knows that the times are against him and that his accomplishment, however great, cannot alter the course of history. During his first visit to Nan-yang, Liu Pei is told by Ts'ui Chou-p'ing, one of Chu-ko's bosom friends acquainted with his ambitions:

"You, sir, wish to restore order, and this shows your benevolence. But, since the earliest times, order and disorder have always succeeded one another. . . . Now we are entering a period of disorder after a period of order and the present disorder cannot be immediately rectified. You, sir, wish K'ung-ming to change the decrees of heaven and earth and regulate the workings of yin and yang, but I am afraid this task is not easy and to attempt it would be a vain expenditure of energy. Have you not heard that he who complies with the decree of heaven has an easy time and he who works against it has a hard time? What the science of numbers has foretold reason can not alter; what fate has decreed man can not change.[84]

When Chu-ko Liang finally agrees to serve, therefore, he is in large part touched by Liu Pei's sincerity. As a practical man, he must know that he could not earn the complete trust of either Ts'ao Ts'ao or Sun Ch'üan, both men being staffed with competent counselors, and as a Han loyalist, he will not want to serve them. But in the service of Liu Pei, he will enjoy a free hand and the challenge of building something from scratch. Though, as presented in the novel, he is a man of prescience able to predict the outcome of events, his acceptance of the stupendous task of restoring the Han dynasty through Liu Pei's legitimate succession to the Han throne speaks for his Confucian convictions. In the official history he is presented as a Legalist administrator,[85] in popular imagination he is seen with the trappings of a Taoist magician, but in the novel he must be seen

first of all as a Confucian statesman who attempts to achieve the impossible out of his friendship for a man who reposes complete trust in him. His youthful preference for Taoist reclusion and his command of Taoist magic, however exploited by the novelist in concession to popular taste, only accentuate the poignant tragedy of his Confucian devotion.

But no friendship, however binding, can be the sum total of one's emotional obligations. If Liu Pei and Chu-ko Liang are united in their ideal of a Shu Han kingdom that will someday inherit the Chinese empire, they are set apart by their regard for other imperatives that determine policy. If Chu-ko Liang loves Liu Pei as a friend, he eventually places a higher value on what he stands for—a united China under the rulership of the Liu house. If Liu Pei places complete confidence in his minister, he nevertheless has his own reputation to care for and his other emotional obligations to meet, especially those to his sworn brothers. In his humbler years he has long cultivated an image of kindness and benevolence to offset his political disadvantages, and now under the efficient guidance of Chu-ko Liang he will nevertheless demur at policies of expansion that would tarnish that image. He heartily agrees with his minister about the necessity of occupying Ching-chou and Szechwan, but he is reluctant to dislodge from these regions their rightful rulers who happen to be his distant kinsmen, Liu Piao and Liu Chang. Chu-ko Liang has to honor his scruples and eventually gains these two areas after much delay. Ching-chou, in particular, is not taken until after Sun Ch'üan has already established his claim over it. The subsequent dispute over Ching-chou, as we have partially seen in our account of Kuan Yü, weakens Shu considerably.

Liu Pei and Chu-ko Liang are completely at variance following the death of Kuan Yü. Lo Kuan-chung, who has hitherto treated Liu Pei's scruples and indecision as something for Chu-ko to triumph over in his continual exercise of amazing resourcefulness, now arrives at the climactic point in their relationship, with due awareness of its explosive dramatic possibilities.

We have seen Chu-ko Liang's reaction to Kuan Yü's death. In order to thwart the designs of Wei and ultimately bring about its downfall, he has long upheld a policy of alliance with Wu. Since Kuan Yü's conduct has worsened the relations between the two states, he deems it imperative that friendship be restored, especially since Wu is willing to make huge concessions to compensate for its crime. If another general had been slain, Liu Pei perhaps would have agreed to this cool-headed rationalist policy. But since the victim of Wu's treachery is his sworn brother, he brushes aside the counsel of Chu-ko and of all others who have the best interests of the state at heart to pursue private vengeance. A politician long used to prudence and dissimulation in his slow climb to prominence, Liu Pei finally turns into a man of passion, a roused Achilles intent on punishing a whole state for the crime of the murder of his beloved Patroclus.

While Kuan Yü and Chang Fei (who is murdered by his underlings soon after the death of Kuan) are still alive, their complete loyalty to their sworn brother has only served to bolster his political fortune so that for Liu Pei the claims of private friendship are never in conflict with the claims of political ambition. But, with their death, the former claims now dictate his state policy. It is a mark of his tragic dignity that Liu Pei should decide in favor of private vengeance; at the same time he appears the doomed hero of Greek tragedy, elated with overweening pride. Ever since Chu-ko Liang became his chief minister, Liu Pei has entrusted to him the conduct of major military campaigns, his own experience as a military commander having been mostly disastrous. But now, to punish Wu, he insists on leading personally a major expedition, which ends in the almost total annihilation of his forces camped by the bank of the Yangtze to the length of 700 li. He despises the young and obscure Wu commander Lu Sun and scorns to seek the advice of Chu-ko, who is stationed in the capital. When Ma Liang, a competent adviser, urges him to do so, he gives the proud answer, "I, too, am well versed in strategy, why should I consult the prime minister?"[36] Ma

Liang, however, finally exacts his permission to consult Chu-ko Liang:

> Reaching Chengtu, Ma Liang lost no time in seeing the prime minister and presented him the map detailing the deployment of the army. . . . After examining the map, K'ung-ming tapped the table and cried out in distress: "Who advised our lord to adopt such an arrangement? He ought to be put to death!" Ma Liang answered, "It is entirely our lord's own work; no other had any hand in it." K'ung-ming lamented, "The fate of the Han dynasty is sealed!"[37]

Chu-ko Liang, who does not share Liu Pei's passion for vengeance, sees the impending disaster primarily as a crushing blow to all his hopes for the renewal of the Han empire. With all his unfeigned devotion to his prince, he nevertheless impulsively calls for his death because Liu Pei the man now stands in the way of Liu Pei the politician-idealist. Yet, though his folly will create insuperable difficulties for his prime minister, Liu Pei is seen in his last reckless act as man of *i* (righteousness, selfless friendship) obeying a higher kind of duty than that enjoined by the ordinary dictates of prudence and success. In the peach garden he and his newly sworn brothers had vowed, "Though we were not born on the same day of the same year, we wish to die on the same day of the same year."[38] Now, although his death wish urges him to commit folly on an extravagant scale, yet his political failure spells his human success.

After his disastrous defeat, Liu Pei is too ashamed to go back to his capital. While at his temporary quarters in Pai-ti-ch'eng, the dying emperor recalls Chu-ko Liang from Chengtu to entrust the future to him, in one of the most moving passages in the novel:

> K'ung-ming arrived at the Yung-an palace, and, seeing that his lord was critically ill, he prostrated himself at the foot of his bed. The First Emperor bade him sit by his bed and patted his back, saying, "It is thanks to you that I became an emperor. How could anyone suspect that I could become so stupid as not to follow your advice, and therefore reap this harvest of failure? I have fallen sick with remorse and shame and now I shall not live long. My heir is a weakling, and I cannot but

entrust the future to you." His tears were streaming over his face as he concluded his speech. Also in tears, K'ung-ming said, "May Your Majesty meet the hopes of the people by a speedy recovery."

The First Emperor looked about him and saw that Ma Shu, the younger brother of Ma Liang, was present. He bade him retire. When Ma Shu had left the chamber, the First Emperor asked K'ung-ming, "What do you think of Ma Shu?" K'ung-ming replied, "He is one of our ablest men." "Not so," said the First Emperor. "I have observed him and his words exceed his deeds. He cannot be trusted with heavy responsibilities. May you ponder my words."

Having said this, he gave orders that the high officers of the state be admitted to his presence. Taking paper and brush, he then wrote his testament and handed it over to K'ung-ming. "I am no scholar and only roughly informed of the basic principles," said he with a sigh. "But a sage [Tseng Tzu] said, 'When a bird is about to die, its cry is sad, and when a man is about to die, his words are good.' I had hoped that we could all see the destruction of Ts'ao and the restoration of the Han house, but unfortunately I am now called away and this last command of mine I ask you, prime minister, to give to my heir Ch'an. Tell him not to take my words lightly, and please guide and instruct him in all things."

K'ung-ming and all those present wept and prostrated themselves, saying, "May Your Majesty not overtire yourself. We will do our utmost whereby to prove our gratitude for the kindness we have received." Then the First Emperor bade the attending eunuch to raise K'ung-ming from the floor. With one hand he brushed away his tears while with the other he grasped K'ung-ming's hand and said, "The end is near; I have something confidential to tell you."

"What command has Your Majesty to give?"

The First Emperor wept, "You are ten times as able as Ts'ao P'i. I am sure you will pacify the empire and complete the great work. If my heir can be helped, then help him, but if he proves unworthy, then take the throne yourself in Chengtu."

As K'ung-ming followed the speech to the end, a cold sweat broke out all over his body and he almost lost the use of his limbs. He fell on his knees and wept, saying, "How could I dare harbor any other thought than to wear out my limbs and serve your son with the utmost faithfulness and loyalty until I die?" Having said so, he knocked his head against the ground until it bled. The First Emperor then asked K'ung-ming to sit on his bed and called Liu Yung, the prince of Lu, and Liu Li, the prince of Liang, to come closer to receive his instructions: "My sons, remember my words. After my death you three brothers are to treat the prime minister as you would your father and not be remiss." Having said so, he bade the two princes to bow to K'ung-ming on their bent knees. They did so, and K'ung-ming said to the First Emperor, "Even if my brains were spilled on the ground, I could not hope to repay your kindness."

Turning to the assembled officers, the First Emperor said, "I have confided my orphan to the care of the prime minister and bidden him to treat him as a father. You too, sirs, are not to be remiss in performing your duties. This is my dying request and charge to you."

Then he charged Chao Yün, "You and I have gone together through many dangers and difficulties, but now we are to part. For our old friendship's sake, please look after my son. Remember my words." Yün wept and said, "How could I dare not to do my best at all times?" Then the First Emperor turned to the others, "Sirs, I am unable to speak to you one by one and lay a charge upon each of you. I trust you will all do your best." These words were his last. He was sixty-three, and he died on the twenty-fourth day of the fourth month, in the summer of the third year of Chang-wu.[89]

In his dying hour, the chastened Liu Pei is keenly aware that his last act of rashness has grievously disappointed his prime minister. But, if he has failed him, he is sure that his heir apparent will do even worse. For the good of his kingdom and to assure him complete freedom as a statesman, would it not be better if Chu-ko Liang should succeed to his throne? But if his alternative injunction to his minister—to supplant his son if he proves unworthy—betrays an impulse of idealistic generosity, Chu-ko is surely right in interpreting it as a harrowing trial of his loyalty. Liu Pei does not press his offer again in face of Chu-ko's dramatic demonstration of his devotion. With a man of dynastic ambitions, it cannot be helped that his sons should stay uppermost in his mind.

And with all his deference to Chu-ko's wisdom, Liu Pei does not entirely abdicate his superiority: his evaluation of Ma Shu proves

for once that he is a sounder judge of character than his minister. The novelist has planted this little scene here so as to anticipate the one major miscalculation in Chu-ko's career, when his misplaced trust in Ma Shu leads to military disaster.[40] On that occasion Chu-ko will cry as he belatedly recalls his master's words. Never again in Chinese history has there been a comparably touching farewell between emperor and minister, and Lo Kuan-chung has properly presented their relationship as one of abiding friendship fortified by a common ideal. But at the same time he does not overlook the political overtones of this pathetic scene, and, in doing so, he has made Liu Pei into a memorable character of historical credibility.

In the preceding sections I have focused my attention on three of the major characters, Kuan Yü, Chu-ko Liang, and Liu Pei, and several lesser ones, such as Chao Yün, Sun Ts'e, Ch'en Kung, and Ni Heng. In doing so, I have demonstrated the subtleties of Lo Kuan-chung's seemingly simple art and introduced some of the major themes of his book. This critical procedure is justified because, unlike a modern novel, *San kuo* does not exhibit an imagistic or symbolic structure, and its language, while always functional, is plain, in the tradition of Chinese historiography, with rhetorical flourishes introduced only in the longer speeches of the characters. In Ni Heng's tirade against Ts'ao Ts'ao we have a specimen of this type of rhetoric, but otherwise I have only quoted excerpts whose dominant feature is the exchange of short speeches among various characters. Such dialogues are very difficult to translate because the ubiquitous character *yüeh* (in more colloquial novels, this would be replaced by *tao*), which introduces every speech, becomes obtrusively and monotonously emphatic when rendered into English as "said." For all Chinese traditional novels, perhaps the best way to transpose short scenes of dialogue is to cast them in the form of a drama, with *yüeh* or *tao* reduced to a colon and with the accompanying verbal adjectives, such as *hsiao* (smiling) and *ch'i* (weeping), placed in parentheses. So rendered, these scenes may gain the rapidity and liveliness of comparable scenes in *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Boswell's *Life of Johnson*.

I have presented *San kuo* primarily as a novel of character with its continual preoccupation with human motivation. Yet a young Chinese reading the work for the first time will inevitably be engrossed in the story itself, in its countless military campaigns and political intrigues. But for the mature reader even the cleverest stratagems of Chu-ko Liang, however they may overawe the young, are nothing beside the cunning of a Western detective, and few scenes of armed combat are as vivid as those in *The Iliad*, where the duel of champions is inevitably presented in sharp and grim detail. Like most other Chinese historical novelists, Lo Kuan-chung is often merely content with summary narration, giving us the number of strokes exchanged between two generals until one flees or is killed. Occasionally we come upon scenes of combat that stick to our memory, such as the following one in which the hero is the brave Wei general, Hsia-hou Tun:

> Advancing with his army, Hsia-hou Tun soon encountered Kao Shun [a general of Lü Pu's] and his men. He rode forward, his lance poised in his hand, and challenged Kao Shun to battle. Kao Shun accepted the challenge and they fought forty or fifty bouts. Then Kao Shun began to weaken and he fled. Tun pressed him hard and Kao Shun rode around the area where his troops were arrayed. Undaunted, Hsia-hou Tun also circled the area. There stationed among the troops was Ts'ao Hsing who secretly stretched his bow and fitted the arrow, aiming straight. As Hsia-hou Tun came closer, he shot the arrow right into his left eye. Tun shrieked and straightway pulled out the arrow. But the eyeball was also pulled out. He cried, "This is the essence of my father and blood of my mother: I cannot throw it away!" He put it in his mouth and swallowed it. Then he again leveled his lance and galloped toward Ts'ao Hsing. The latter was caught unaware as the lance ran through his face, and he was hurled from his horse a dead man. Both sides were struck dumb with amazement.[41]

Hsia-hou Tun's encounter with Kao Shun is a routine duel done in the routine manner, but when Ts'ao Hsing shoots an arrow into his eye, Hsia-hou Tun becomes no longer a mere warrior, but a brave man rising to the challenge of a great test. His subsequent

words (adapted from the *p'ing-hua* version) and actions are eloquent with defiant courage.[42]

In like manner, the battles and intrigues in *San kuo* are interesting to the extent that they are informed with human purpose. As in the *Tso Commentary,* the first major Chinese chronicle to describe battles in detail, human interest resides far more in the preparation for battle than in the battle itself.[43] This is true of the most celebrated long episode in the novel—the Battle of Red Cliff, during which the combined forces of Sun Ch'üan and Liu Pei smash Ts'ao Ts'ao's ambitious design to cross the Yangtze River and subdue the Wu kingdom. It is the pivotal event upon which hangs the eventual equilibrium of power of the three kingdoms, and Lo Kuan-chung rises to the occasion by giving it the most elaborate fictional treatment of any event in the novel.

Initially, as the threat of invasion strikes home, most of Sun Ch'üan's counselors advise surrender since the untested mettle of Wu is conceivably no match for Ts'ao Ts'ao's proven might. It is the eloquence of Liu Pei's emissary, Chu-ko Liang, and the brave determination of Sun Ch'üan's two farsighted commanders, Chou Yü and Lu Su, that change the defeatist attitude at the Wu court and turn imminent doom into proud victory. Basing his account on Ch'en Shou and Ssu-ma Kuang, the author properly exploits the dramatic possibilities of this tense situation and makes out of it an exciting narrative of great credibility.

Unused to naval battle, Ts'ao Ts'ao has in the meanwhile followed the advice of spies who recommended the linking of his ships by iron chains to provide greater stability for his land soldiers. He is so pleased with his armada that about a week before the naval encounter he gives a banquet for his civil and military staff:

> It was the fifteenth of the eleventh month, the thirteenth year of Chien-an. The day was sunny and the winds were quiet on the river. Ts'ao ordered a banquet with music to be set up on the commander's ship, saying, "This evening I am going to entertain my generals."
>
> The day turned dark and the moon rose from the eastern hills, bright as the sun. The Yangtze River shone like a wide swath of white silk. Ts'ao sat on the deck of the commander's ship, flanked by several hundred attendants, all splendidly attired and wielding either javelins or tridents. The civil and military officers were all seated in their proper order of precedence. Ts'ao looked around and saw the hills of Nan-p'ing outlined as if in a picture. The city of Ch'ai-sang lay in the east while the river showed west as far as Hsia-k'ou. He gazed south at the Fan Mountain and descried in the north the woods of Wu-lin. The view stretched far on every side, and he was filled with joy, saying to the officers:
>
> "Since I raised my righteous army to remove all traitors and insurgents in the country, I have vowed to pacify all the land within the four seas, and the only area that has not yet submitted to me is Chiang-nan [the region south of the Yangtze]. With my million sturdy troops, and with you gentlemen doing my bidding, how could I fail to take it now? Once Chiang-nan is subdued, there will be no more fighting, and you gentlemen will share prosperity and high honors with me, to enjoy the peace."
>
> The civil and military officers all rose to thank him, saying, "May the trumpet of victory sound soon! All our lives we shall repose in the shadow of Your Excellency's good fortune."
>
> By midnight Ts'ao was in high spirits. Pointing to the south bank of the river, he said, "Chou Yü and Lu Su, they know not heaven's design. Fortunately, some of their men have surrendered to us and will wreak havoc upon them. This is indeed heaven's opportune help to me!" Hsün Yu advised, "Your Excellency, please say no more. This might leak out." Ts'ao laughed loudly. "You gentlemen drinking wine with me and all my guards and attendants here, you are very close to me. What's the harm if I talk about such matters?" Then, pointing to Hsia-k'ou, he said, "Liu Pei and Chu-ko Liang, you don't realize that you have only the strength of ants and yet you want to shake Mount T'ai from its foundations. How foolish can you get!" Then, turning around to his generals, he confided, "I am now fifty-four. If I get hold of Chiang-nan, there is something I would like to possess. Formerly, Ch'iao Kung and I were good friends. I know both of his daughters are great beauties, though Sun Ts'e and Chou Yü married them some years ago. I am now building my Bronze Bird Tower by the Chang River. If I take Chiang-nan, I'll have both of the Ch'iao sisters married to me, and place them in the tower to amuse my old age. Then all my wishes will be fulfilled."

He concluded with loud laughter. The T'ang poet Tu Mu has a poem about this:

A broken halberd buried in the sand, its iron head uncorroded by rust—
When washed and sharpened, it tells of a great battle in a former dynasty.
Had the eastern wind refused aid to Chou Yü,
The Bronze Bird Tower would have imprisoned the daughters of Ch'iao.

While laughing and making merry, Ts'ao Ts'ao suddenly heard the cawing of crows as they flew toward the south. Ts'ao asked, "Why are the crows cawing at night?" Those around him replied, "The moon being very bright, they thought it was dawn. So they left their trees and cawed." Ts'ao again laughed. By now he was intoxicated, and he took his lance and stood by the prow. He poured a libation into the river and drank three full goblets of wine. Then, lowering the lance, he told the generals, "With this lance, I smashed the Yellow Turbans, captured Lü Pu, destroyed Yuan She, vanquished Yuan Shao, and went deep into the North until I reached the Liao-tung Peninsula. I have conquered the length and breadth of the land and have not left unfulfilled my ambition to be a great hero. Now, facing the moon, my heart is full. I am going to improvise a song, and you gentlemen harmonize with me." And he sang:

Facing wine, you should sing accordingly—
How long is your life-span?
It's like the morning dew
Soon vanishing under the sun.
A burdened soul needs release,
Too often oppressed with sad thoughts.
What's the best cure for sorrow?
The choicest brew of Tu K'ang.
You scholars with your blue collars,
Always and ever I think of you;
Because of you gentlemen
I've been sighing and singing;
Yu, yu, cry the deer

Nibbling southernwood in the fields—
I have worthy guests.
Let's play the zithers and blow on the *sheng!*
Bright, bright is the moon,
Unending its glory:
Yet sorrow rises in my heart
Over my unceasing quest for talent;
Over narrow farm roads
You have come to join me—
After a long separation, we carouse
And talk, thinking of our old friendship.
The moon is bright and the stars are few,
Black crows fly south.
They circle the tree three times
And find no branches to perch on.
One never complains of a mountain being too high
Or a river being too deep:
Oh, to seek talent with the selflessness of Chou Kung
So that the world turns with contentment toward me.

After he had sung, all harmonized with him and joined in the merry mood. Suddenly, a man rising from his seat remonstrated, "Our great army is facing a critical battle, and all the officers and troops are risking their lives for the occasion. Why does Your Excellency utter such inauspicious words?" Ts'ao looked at him and knew he was Liu Fu, *tzu* Yuan-ying, the governor of Yangchow. He was a native of Hsiang, of the region of P'ei-kuo, and he had begun to receive notice while in Ho-fei. When first appointed to Yangchow, he had resettled the refugees there, established schools, set up land for cultivation by the military, and raised the moral tone of the place. He had long served Ts'ao Ts'ao and had a distinguished record. At once Ts'ao asked, with his lance still poised horizontally, "What words of mine are unlucky?" Fu replied, " 'The moon is bright and the stars are few,/ Black crows fly south./ They circle the tree three times/ And find no branches to perch on'—these are inauspicious words." Incensed, Ts'ao said, "How dare you ruin my good mood?" With one thrust of the lance, he killed Liu Fu. The rest were all frightened, and the banquet was over.

The next morning, again sober, Ts'ao was filled with unending re-

morse. The son of Liu Fu, Liu Hsi, requested leave to bury his father. Ts'ao said with tears, "Last night I was drunk and killed your father by mistake. I am filled with remorse. Your father shall be interred with the honors of a minister of the highest rank." [44]

For Lo Kuan-chung, this is a scene of supreme fictional realization. The official history gives no record of this banquet,[45] but it is entirely in keeping with Ts'ao Ts'ao's character that he should have given a party like that in anticipation of a crowning victory. During that period of history, in China as elsewhere, a man of fifty-four is considered no longer in his prime, and Ts'ao Ts'ao has led an active life of unceasing campaigning. His speeches at the banquet, therefore, express his sense of satisfaction that he has indeed been an unparalleled hero in his time, and looks confidently to his victory. But along with it there is a note of fatigue in his feeling that he may, with the vanquishment of Wu, look forward to a time of happy retirement in the company of his two captured beauties. (In his *fu* on the Bronze Bird Tower, Ts'ao Ts'ao's poet-son, Ts'ao Chih, does mention these two beauties. Earlier in the novel, pretending that he doesn't know whom the Ch'iao sisters married, Chu-ko Liang has quoted this poem before Chou Yü to steel his determination to fight.[46] In both instances the author has made expert dramatic use of a well-known poem.)

But, above all, in his enjoyment of the moonlight view, Ts'ao Ts'ao appears enraptured with wine and the prospect of a victory. The song he is made to recite is the most famous of his extant poems; it is a banquet poem in which Ts'ao Ts'ao laments the transience of life, quotes verses from the *Book of Poetry* to indicate his yearning for talent and his enlightened statesmanship. In all probability, it was composed for a more intimate occasion when the poet expressed mingled sorrow and joy over his reunion with some old friends. Though the poem does not entirely fit the present occasion, it nevertheless serves to introduce a startlingly beautiful scene of crows awakened from their slumber and flying south. And for the novelist the crow is a rare instance of a symbol. Though not as much detested in China as in the West, it, especially in contrast to the

magpie, has its unpleasant and unlucky associations. The crows' failure to find a perch in their southward flight signifies the doom of the expedition. Ts'ao Ts'ao is fully enraged when Liu Fu spells out the ominous significance of his poem, and in his murderous wrath against the man as in his subsequent remorse we are shown further facets of his character. What Lo Kuan-chung has given us in the banquet scene is, then, the fascinating portrait of an unpredictable poet-statesman of enormous self-confidence, at once expansive and violent and not untouched by certain signs of age and weakness. Readers who persist in regarding the Ts'ao Ts'ao of *San kuo* as an arch villain show a lack of appreciation for masterful scenes like this.

But because the Battle of Red Cliff has been much elaborated upon by the storytellers, Lo Kuan-chung, in his enlargement of the episode beyond the accounts of Ch'en Shou and P'ei Sung-chih, also resorts to time-sanctioned fiction that represents a false simplification of history. If, in the scene just discussed, he has enhanced the historical reality of Ts'ao Ts'ao through his use of fiction, elsewhere he has reduced some important protagonists of the battle to caricature in his attempt to glorify Chu-ko Liang. Nearly all critics have praised the author for his fictional elaboration of the Battle of Red Cliff, but Hu Shih is surely right when he deplores his handling of Chu-ko vis-à-vis the Wu statesmen during the battle and afterwards. Official history has recorded many conversations among Chu-ko, Lu Su, Chou Yü, and Sun Ch'üan, and whenever Lo Kuan-chung reproduces these conversations in his novel both Lu Su and Chou Yü appear as farsighted and courageous statesmen in contrast to Sun Ch'üan's other cowardly advisers. But in the more fictional scenes they become mere comic foils to Chu-ko's genius. Thus Lu Su, historically a great and astute commander in his own right, becomes Dr. Watson to Chu-ko's Sherlock Holmes, forever naïve and forever astounded by the latter's foresight and cleverness. In like fashion, Chou Yü becomes Chu-ko's ineffectual rival, consumed with envy and obsessed with the desire to trap the latter and kill him. Of course, Chu-ko easily eludes every trap, only to infuriate

the Wu commander and bring on his own death. Although the Chinese find all this delightful reading, in such episodes history itself appears frivolous and lighthearted, in marked contrast to the gravity of the rest of the novel. Since the Battle of Red Cliff takes place during the springtime of Chu-ko's success, long before his futile expeditions against Wei have robbed him of all gaiety, the author is certainly justified in adopting a gladsome comic mode. But, as a great adapter of historical sources gingerly embarking on the path of fiction, Lo Kuan-chung can achieve this comedy only by caricaturing the historical reality of Chou Yü and Lu Su.

The victory of the Wu forces ultimately depends on the fire strategy agreed upon by Chou Yü and Chu-ko Liang. But Ts'ao Ts'ao is no fool: he chains his ships together because he correctly reasons that a successful attack by fire on his fleet will require the assistance of winds blowing in its direction and that since in the dead of winter there are only winds blowing from the north and west, the fire strategy if adopted by the Wu forces will boomerang. To enhance his role as the architect of the victory, Chu-ko Liang is therefore forced to assume the garb of a Taoist priest to summon the southeastern winds.[47] I have earlier said that Chu-ko's magical arts and accurate predictions never seriously affect the course of events —they are either inconsequential or nullified by chance or fate— but in the present instance the wind-summoning ritual is both crucial to a decisive battle and carried out with astounding success. Despite its perennial popularity, one may object to this scene of magic not because one objects to supernaturalism as such but because the novel is predominantly a human drama of cunning and courage unfolded in the absence of supernatural aid.

After calling attention to the childishness of some of the most celebrated scenes in the account of the Battle of Red Cliff, Hu Shih draws the conclusion that, if these most fictionalized scenes are obviously weak, then the rest of the novel which is little fictionalized must enjoy even less literary success.[48] But Lo Kuan-chung, at least while he was composing *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms,* had no pretension to being a novelist. Occasionally he rises

to the challenge of fiction, but his habitual strength lies in his role as a popular historian. He exhibits little talent for that full-bodied kind of fiction which calls for the invention of character and plot in the absence of historical documentation. Where his sources have misled him—as in some of the episodes in the Battle of Red Cliff—his further elaboration of these sources only enhances their naïveté.

The habitual strength of the work is therefore far more impressively present in the little fictionalized battle at Kuan-tu between the armies of Ts'ao Ts'ao and Yuan Shao than in the battle at Red Cliff.[49] In hewing to the line of the historical chronicle, Lo Kuan-chung has preserved intact a gripping story that could have been fitting material for Greek tragedy. Yuan Shao's indecisiveness and lack of leadership, his passionate partiality for one of his sons, his failure to make use of a group of individually brilliant but feuding counselors—these are some of the factors in the easy victory scored by Ts'ao Ts'ao over an amply provisioned army of numerical superiority. Lo Kuan-chung does not elaborate on any of the episodes building up to the battle at Kuan-tu and the subsequent rapid disintegration of Yuan Shao's forces, but the reader nevertheless feels caught in the web of a weighty historical event fraught with deep human significance.

Yuan Shao has already amassed a large army and sent an ultimatum to Ts'ao Ts'ao, who in the meantime is preparing a campaign against the puny strength of Liu Pei. Understandably, Liu Pei sends an emissary to Yuan Shao asking him to launch an attack on Ts'ao Ts'ao while his main strength is occupied elsewhere. The emissary, Sun Ch'ien, asks one of Yuan Shao's counselors, T'ien Feng, to arrange an interview for him with Yuan:

> Feng then brought Sun Ch'ien to see Yuan Shao and presented the letter. To Feng's surprise, Shao looked haggard and was carelessly and improperly attired. Feng asked, "My lord, what happened?" Shao said, "I am about to die." "But why do you utter such words?" asked Feng. "I have five sons," answered Shao, "and the youngest pleases me most. Now he is suffering from a scabby skin disease and his life is doomed. How can I have the heart to think of other matters?" Feng said, "Now

Ts'ao Ts'ao is attacking Liu Pei in the east, and the capital Hsü-ch'ang is undefended. If you send a righteous army to raid the city, you can at once protect the emperor and save ten thousands of people from Ts'ao's tyranny. This is a rare opportunity; please think it over carefully." Shao said, "I also know this is the best course, but I am worried and distressed and I am afraid this expedition will bring me bad luck." "What's there to worry about?" asked Feng. Shao replied, "Of my five sons, only the youngest one is exceptional. If anything happens to him, I am done." Then he decided not to dispatch his army and told Sun Ch'ien, "When you return, you may tell Hsüan-te the real reason. If he is in trouble, he can come here and join me. I will find some way to help him." T'ien Feng struck the ground with his staff, saying, "When faced with this rare opportunity, not to grab it because of a child's sickness, what a pity! The future is doomed, alas!" With a deep sigh, he stamped his feet and walked out.[50]

This scene is based on Ch'en Shou's history:

T'ien Feng advised Yuan Shao to attack Ts'ao Ts'ao from behind, but, on the excuse of his son's illness, Shao disallowed the move. Feng struck the ground with his staff, saying, "When faced with this rare opportunity, not to grab it because of a child's sickness, what a pity!" [51]

The expanded passage has retained the basic situation and the angry exclamation of T'ien Feng. But by specifying his son's disease as something of no consequence, it has also permanently fixed the image of an indecisive Yuan Shao plagued by unreasoned paternal love. Furthermore, we have not been told earlier of his great fondness for his youngest son and Lo Kuan-chung has made no attempt to analyze this partiality of his which contributes to his defeat and death and to the subsequent contention among his sons. He respects the given historical data with the result that, in their unromanticized complexity, they retain the makings of a tragic myth.

As Yuan Shao heads toward disaster, his weak character is continually revealed through the comments of friends and foes alike. Among other things, he continues to disregard the advice of T'ien Feng and eventually places him in prison. After his defeat at

Kuan-tu, however, we are told that Yuan Shao speaks with great remorse: "Because I did not heed T'ien Feng's advice, I suffered a great defeat and lost many generals. How could I have the face to see him on my return?"

The next day [the story continues], Yuan Shao mounted his horse for the return journey. As he was about to start, he was met by another counselor, Feng Chi, and his reinforcements. Shao said to Feng Chi, "I suffered this defeat because I didn't listen to T'ien Feng. I am now going back, but I am ashamed to face him." Feng Chi therefore took the opportunity to slander T'ien Feng. "While in prison Feng heard of my lord's defeat and he clapped his hands and laughed, 'Precisely as I have predicted.'" Yuan Shao was highly incensed. "How dare a mere scholar make fun of me? I must kill him." He then gave a messenger his personal sword and ordered him to leave for Chi-chou immediately and kill T'ien Feng in prison.

While T'ien Feng was in prison, one day the jailer came to congratulate him. Feng asked, "What for?" The jailer replied, "General Yuan is returning from a great defeat. He must treat you from now on with redoubled respect." Feng laughed, "Now I am a dead man." The jailer asked, "Why speak of death when everyone is pleased with your change of fortune?" Feng said, "General Yuan appears generous but is actually envious of talent and never thankful for one's loyal and honest service. Elated with victory, he might have pardoned me; now that he has been put to shame over his defeat, I may not hope to live."

The jailer was still incredulous. Before long the messenger with the sword came with Yuan Shao's orders to take T'ien Feng's head and the jailer was dismayed. Feng said, "I knew all along I was to die." The jail attendants all shed tears. Feng said, "Stupid indeed is he who, born into this world with all his talent and ambition, has chosen to serve an unworthy lord. Today I die, but I deserve no pity." He then killed himself in prison.[52]

This episode, also adapted from Ch'en Shou, places Yuan Shao with finality. As for T'ien Feng, he appears as another of those minor characters who could have done greater deeds if he had served a worthier master. If for Yuan Shao and all those enjoying the exercise of leadership their fate is inseparable from their char-

acter, then for T'ien Feng, Ch'en Kung, and a host of others whose very survival depends upon the trust and favor of a master, fate is something far more capricious than character. Asking for no pity, T'ien Feng blames only himself for having made a wrong choice, but that choice itself can be seen as an act of fate. Already in Ssu-ma Ch'ien's *Records* we are impressed with the inscrutable workings of heaven in determining the fate of many a man of ambition and talent. Because in *San kuo* history is no longer broken up into a series of individual and collective biographies, the ultimate sense of fate as heaven's design emerges with even greater clarity. Not only the battle at Kuan-tu but scores of other weighty and little fictionalized events contribute to the impression that, while heaven's design is inscrutable, it is at the same time the sum total of men's conscious endeavor. From the meanest general who makes a brief appearance only to forfeit his life in the battlefield to the sagacious Chu-ko Liang whose prolonged attempt to rectify the design of heaven ends in failure, the crowded stage of *San kuo* is enkindled with this sense of earnest endeavor. However small his role in history, each candidate for fame enacts a personal drama which is the impingement of his endeavor upon his fate.