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Philosophical Influences in The Art of War found in The Romance of the Three Kingdoms

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PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCES IN *THE ART OF WAR* FOUND IN
THE ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS

PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCES IN *THE ART OF WAR* FOUND IN
THE ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in History

By

Nathaniel Ethan Clark
University of Arkansas
Bachelor of Arts in History, 2008

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ABSTRACT

“Philosophical Influences in *The Art of War* found in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*” is an examination of Sunzi’s philosophy about leadership in *The Art of War* as applied to the moral character, or lack thereof, of historical Han Dynasty leaders, Liu Bei and Cao Cao. In Luo Guanzhong’s *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the two are fictionalized with oppositional personalities and corresponding philosophical bases. I explore the ways in which their actions embody or reject the philosophy found in Sunzi’s *The Art of War*.

This thesis is approved for recommendation
to the Graduate Council

Thesis Director:

Dr. Liang Cai

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Dr. Rembrandt Wolpert

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Genghis Khan whom I discovered when I was fourteen years old and who taught me that history is fascinating and the people who make it so are worthy of honor and remembrance.

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Preface

The Connection Implied between *The Art of War* and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

Trust no one who has read *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*
 —and do not trust the person who has read it more than three times!
 —Chengdu (Shu) saying

Is there a connection between Luo Guanzhong's *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and Sunzi's *The Art of War*? Both are often discussed independently in relation to classical or historical underpinnings, but I have found no research that specifically has answered this question. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine Sunzi's *The Art of War* to discover if a relationship is implied between the text and its philosophical precepts and the mythological and historical characters and their actions and interactions in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. My study of *The Art of War* as reflected in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* reveals a relationship between the two works.

My method of research is to examine the novel in light of the “analects” set forth in *The Art of War* to prove this relationship. I will discuss ways in which Luo Guanzhong's epic¹ illustrates or does not illustrate Sunzi's categories and ideology and by doing so will examine the interconnectivity of the texts. Therefore this thesis will explore the primary sources, *The Art of War* and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, along with numerous secondary sources to be aware of the variety of scholarly opinions on the work.

Also basic to this study is the examination of the military strategist's particular belief system. His is unlike the “self-styled Confucians”² who held “the orthodox philosophy and prescribed state view in the Former Han,” that “the ruler need only cultivate his Virtue, accord with the seasons, and implement benevolent policies in order to be successful in attracting

¹ Luo Guanzhong, *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel*, trans. Moss Roberts. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. Rpt. 1996.). References within my thesis are to this text unless otherwise stated.

² Ralph Sawyer and Mei-chün Lee Sawyer, Introduction to *The Art of War* by Sun-tzu, trans. Ralph D. Sawyer and Mei-chün Lee Sawyer (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 14, 31.

universal support and fostering stability.”³

Conversely, he is not Daoist, yet his goals mimic the concepts of *ying* and *yang*: “. . . whoever occupies the battlefield first and awaits the enemy will be at ease; whoever occupies the battlefield afterward . . . will be fatigued.”⁴ Yet, he teaches that combat should be avoided by strategy if possible. If force is necessary, it is only in defense of the state because “[a]nger cannot revert to happiness, annoyance can revert to joy, but a vanquished state cannot be revived, the dead cannot be brought back to life.”⁵

The issue of Sunzi’s philosophy is complicated and is made even more so by the fact that *The Art of War* was developed during Warring States Period, a watershed that produced a variety of philosophies (and well before the end of the Han Dynasty and its Three Kingdoms period). Therefore, throughout the study I clarify Sunzi’s philosophical beliefs. I have found no scholarship specifically related to this significant aspect concerning the strategist.

Explicit Relationship

In a recently (1970’s) unearthed Yinqueshan Shandong Province Han Dynasty tomb, “a partial copy of *The Art of War* in essentially its traditional form” was discovered on “remarkably preserved bamboo slips.”⁶ This location proves the physical relationship between Sunzi’s work and locations referred to in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. This finding is the only explicit connection I have found between the two works.

Implicit Relationship

According to Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, in the late twentieth century, modern

³ Sun-tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Ralph Sawyer and Mei-chün Lee Sawyer (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994), p. 32. References within my thesis are to this text unless otherwise stated.

⁴ Ibid., p. 191.

⁵ Ibid., p. 228.

⁶ Ralph Sawyer and Mei-chün Lee Sawyer, Introduction to *The Art of War*, p. 14.

scholars have “rediscovered the significance of the critical work of . . . Mao Zonggang” whose commentaries were added to the chapters of *The Three Kingdoms* in the seventeenth century and “excised in the early twentieth century from modern editions.”⁷ Unlike early twentieth-century critics who looked upon works like *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*⁸ as describing the realities of Chinese social life but as lacking “architectural development,”⁹ Mao Zonggang saw the text as “not modeling the actual world” but as a “fictional [construct] based on the author’s recognition of the *principles* [my emphasis] that govern the actual world, the patterning of the individual fictional [construct] is modeled according to principles *analogous* [my emphasis] with those governing the actual world.”¹⁰

In other words, the structure is as significant as the “manipulation of the historical facts”¹¹ because Mao Zonggang recognized the work’s philosophical and organic internal relationship as a reflection of a “historically-based view of the legitimacy of the base text, *The Three Kingdoms*.”¹² In 1976 Winston Yan agreed: the work “belongs to the *yen-I* type of historical chronicle mainly based on an official history. As such, it is not sufficiently truthful to be accepted as authentic history nor sufficiently fictionalized with historical imagination to be considered creative fiction.”¹³

⁷ Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, “Seventeenth-Century Chinese Theory of Narrative,” *Poetics East and West*. Ed. Milena Doleželová-Velingerová. Monograph Series of the Toronto Semiotic Circle, Number 4, 1988-9. p.140.

⁸ Doleželová-Velingerová’s article is about critics of three Chinese narratives: *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin*, and *Golden Lotus*.

⁹ Alison Bailey, “Microstructure and Macrostructure: Mao Zonggang’s Discourse on *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*,” *Poetics East and West*. Ed. Milena Doleželová-Velingerová. Monograph Series of the Toronto Semiotic Circle, Number 4, 1988-9. pp.159-160.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹³ Winston L.Y. Yang, “Teaching Chinese Through Chinese Literature,” *The Modern Language Journal* 60, no ½ (Jan.-Feb., 1976): p. 33.

A contemporary who wrote an introduction for *The Water Margin*, Jin Shengtian, defined historiography as distinct from a novelistic text: “the former uses (narrative) writing to represent real events (*yiwēn yunshì*), while the latter creates events to meet the needs of the narrative (*yin wēn shengshì*).¹⁴ Yet, Mao Zonggang saw *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*’s principles as tied directly to “traditional Chinese conceptions of the natural world” in that “a hierarchy of emphasis does exist even while [the original author, Luo Guanzhong,] stresses the necessity of each and every constituent element to the integrity of the whole.”¹⁵

The study of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in light of the principles found in *The Art of War* proves that such an organic connection exists in a work that is a compilation of historical accounts and fictional legend. This connectivity is found in Liu Bei and Cao Cao, historical figures in their fictional forms, whom I have examined through the lens of Sunzi’s leadership philosophies.

¹⁴ Wu, Hua L., “The Concept of Parallelism: Jin Shengtian’s Critical Discourse on *The Water Margin*,” *Poetics East and West*. Ed. Milena Doleželová-Velingerová. Monograph Series of the Toronto Semiotic Circle, Number 4, 1988–9. p. 177.

¹⁵ Bailey, p. 163.

Introduction

A Brief Historical and Textual Background of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

Luo Guanzhong's *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was written approximately twelve hundred years after the historical events it relates. The story is found in two versions, one published in 1522 and the other in the mid-1660's.¹⁶ From its inception, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* has elicited interest and reaction from a diverse audience in a variety of disciplines. This is, in part, because the text reflects human experience, as found in literary, philosophical, historical, economical, and martial studies, intriguing scholars and laymen throughout the centuries. In the last half of the 20th century and the first few years of the 21st, modern philosophers have challenged the findings of previous scholars on the basis of bias or the discovery of new techniques or works that clarified textual ambiguities that had perplexed even the closest of readers. This study, however, is not necessarily a challenge to previous findings; instead it is an addition to them and an examination of the philosophy of one classic text, Sunzi's *The Art of War*, as it applies to the epic.

Historical Background

During the Later Han (25–220 AD), a faction of powerful eunuchs began to control the court. By 189 AD, they were overcome, and wherever they had held power over weak emperors, warlords took their places. One warlord was General Dong Zhuo who sacked the Han capital, Luoyang, but was defeated by Cao Cao, the regent for the child emperor Xian. Cao Cao also helped to crush the Yellow Turban (Yellow Scarves) rebellion, an uprising of starving peasants. He then began his plan to attain the throne of Wei and to destroy the Han Dynasty. Leaders Sun Quan represented Wu (another of the Three Kingdoms) and Liu Bei of Shu (the third kingdom)

¹⁶ Moss Roberts. Afterward in "About Three Kingdoms." *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel*. Abridged Edition. By Luo Guanzhong. Translated by Moss Roberts (1991. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 917. The second version was translated by Mao Zonggang.

attempted to keep each other in check, which would have maintained the Han throne. These three "kingdoms" would never consolidate their power. Eventually, Sima Yan, a former general of Cao Cao would control Wei and end the rule of Cao Pi (Cao Cao's heir).

Creative Influences on *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

A variety of theories exist as to Luo Guanzhong's purposes in writing his version of the Three Kingdoms story, but one of the most plausible is that during Mongol rule during Yuan, works appeared that were pro-Han, rather than favoring Jin (their enemy and associated with Cao Cao). Because Han militancy against foreign rule (Mongols) was increasing, "the government sought to fortify its legitimacy by appropriating . . . national symbols," found in the story line.¹⁷ The Mongols wished to legitimate their rule by comparing Wei, Wu, and Shu as examples of dynasties that had been absorbed by others (Jin) with those "non-entities" that had been usurped by Yuan. The protagonists of their stories became vessels for propaganda to promote the questioning of previous dynasties' legitimacy. Luo Guanzhong lived during the period of transition from Yuan to Ming, and his work may be seen as an attempt at "restoration of Han-like rule in China."¹⁸

Even if this claim were false and the work is of a later period (which some argue), the Mongols engendered fierce "Han-nationalist" anger when they suppressed an uprising led by Emperor Yin Zong and exiled him to Mongolia. Moreover, during this same period, peasant uprisings were becoming commonplace and eunuchs were once again gaining power at court. All of the events mentioned could have been the catalyst for creating an epic that tells of the fall of Han—a dynasty admired by Ming—as a warning to heed. Moss Roberts suggests that if this theory is correct, the author may have wished to be anonymous as a precaution and used the pen

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 961.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 964.

name of another author (who had no works as significant as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*) to protect himself. A later editor, Mao Zonggang, explored “three forms of succession: “legitimate, transitional, and usurped” and continued to stress Luo Guanzhong’s focus on Han legitimacy by “deleting lines that describe Cao Cao’s better and Liu Bei’s worse qualities.”¹⁹

The study I offer is of the philosophical influence of Sunzi’s work as seen in Luo Guanzhong’s fictional artifact rather than on historical characters or actions.

Thesis Overview

Chapter I: A brief overview of the philosophies generally believed to be represented in

The Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism, and representative scholarship. The majority of the scholarship that I encountered points to Confucianism as the main philosophy promoted in the epic.

Chapter II: An exploration of *The Art of War* and the conceptions and misconceptions of Sunzi’s philosophy in relation to modern leadership practices.

Chapter III: A study of “benevolence,” a virtue required to attain the Mandate of Heaven (leadership) in the epic, in relation to Sunzi’s ideal leader and two leaders in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

Chapter IV: An examination of “The Mandate of Heaven” and its attainment during Han as portrayed in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in relation to Sunzi’s ideal leader as found in *The Art of War*.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 966.

Cross References

For clarity, I have signified my cross-referenced chapters with Roman numerals and identified chapters from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* with Arabic numerals.

Characters Mentioned from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

Cao Cao: A non-aristocrat who manipulated Han Emperor Xian and usurped his power.

Cao Pi: Cao Cao's son and eventual leader of Wei Kingdom after deposing Emperor Xian.

Guan Yu: One of the three Peach Tree Garden pact brothers. After his death in battle, he haunts

Cao Cao. Upon hearing of Lord Guan Yu's death, Liu Bei loses his discerning leadership qualities.

Liu Bang: Emperor Gaozu of Han. (First Han emperor.)

Liu Bei: Leader of Shu whom many believed to be the heir to the Han Dynasty. One of the three

Peach Tree Garden pact brothers.

Liu Xian: Last Han Emperor.

Lu Bu: A Warlord who was an enemy to Cao Cao who sends him to Liu Bei in hopes of his murder.

Pang Tong: Young advisor of Liu Bei who advises him to kill Lu Bu.

Sun Quan: Leader of Wu Kingdom.

Yellow Turbans: Peasants who rebelled due to agrarian distress caused by the flooding of the

Yellow River. The rebellion is the opening of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

Zhang Fei: A general for the Shu Dynasty and one of the Peach Tree Garden pact brothers.

Zhang Liang: An early Han strategist who assisted in founding the Han Dynasty.

Zhuge Liang: Liu Bei's most trusted advisor.

Chapter I

Philosophical Influence in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

In order to properly discuss the philosophical influence of *The Art of War* as found in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, it is important to recognize that much of today's criticism of the epic relates to the connections between Confucianism and the text's characters or their actions. Consequently, this chapter is primarily devoted to explaining representative studies of this particular philosophy as it relates to the historical novel. Also addressed are representative studies by those who find Daoist or Legalist influence in the work. Therefore, this chapter is a brief overview of Confucianism, Daoism and Legalism in contemporary interpretive contexts pertaining to *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

Confucianism

Confucianism is a philosophy with multiple variants. To limit its definition, which could in itself be an entire thesis, I define the term in relation to those who called themselves followers of Confucius (Confucians) during the time frame of the popularization of the Three Kingdom legend (220–280 CE). Not until the 14th century C.E. would Luo Guanzhong create *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* as a historical romance. Also for the purposes of this chapter and my thesis, I will limit my definition to include those who uphold and defend *Wuchang*, the five traditional moral principles of *ren* (benevolence), *yi* (righteousness), *li* (ritual), *zhi* (knowledge), and *xin* (integrity).²⁰ These five principles are codified through ritual and reverence. Their "[defense of] traditional values is a determinative feature that distinguishes both Confucius and his followers from other schools."²¹ Fundamentally, followers of Confucius believe that heaven and earth coexist in an equal and dynamic interplay. Any individual can live

²⁰ "Confucianism," *Dictionary of Philosophy*, edited by Dagobert D. Runes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), p. 338.

²¹ Liang Cai, "Why is Xing zi ming chu a Confucian Text? Situating the Xing zi ming chu in Early Chinese Intellectual History," *Between the Si-Meng Lineage and Xunzi: A Study of the Newly Discovered Text The Xing Zi Ming Chu*. Master's Thesis. Cornell University, 2003. pp. 10, 22.

a life that aligns with the cosmos if he sustains *zhong yong* (the mean)—the equilibrium of the universe—by pursuing harmony and balance. Because this harmony depends not only on heaven but also on man, the individual is of central importance, especially in regard to internalizing *Wuchang* through rituals to become partner with the universe. Yet, man also exists within the hierarchy of society. Therefore, *Tian ming* (the Mandate of Heaven) insures that individuals are ruled in concordance with the cosmos because only through *zhong yong* (the mean) can a leader remain in power. Eventually the concept of *Tian ming* became associated with dynastic cycles—when a dynasty could rise and stay in power, but *Tian ming* could be lost when an Emperor loses favor with Heaven. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is set in such a moment, when Late Han is in chaos.

Confucian Interpretive Context

“The Beginning of the End: The Fall of the Han and the Opening of *Three Kingdoms*” by George A. Hayden focuses on chaos according to traditional Chinese historical fiction and historiography found in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Hayden states that Sima Guang’s *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* reveals that the symptoms that resulted in the decline of the Eastern Han reflected corruption from the top down, and the combination of the symptoms resulted in the anger of the people and the loss of *Tian ming* (The Mandate of Heaven).²² Hayden contrasts Sima Guang’s straight-forward historical account of the fall of the Han and the rise of the Three Kingdoms with Mao Zonggang’s²³ *Three Kingdoms* edition with its even more direct connection between the Yellow Scarves and the depraved eunuchs of the court. Hayden states that in these historical accounts, the interpretations of portents are codified

²² George A. Hayden, “The Beginning of the End: The Fall of the Han and the Opening of Three Kingdoms,” *Three Kingdoms and Chinese Culture* edited by Kimberly Besio and Constantine Tung (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 44.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 44–45.

reflections of contemporary governmental problems and predictors of future trends or occurrences. The novel, on the other hand, places the portents in “reflective and predictive functions” in order to show reactions of the characters in the context of Confucian beliefs.²⁴ (See Chapter IV.) For instance, after Heaven sent down omens and portents as the Yellow Scarves began their rebellion, three of the main characters of the epic reacted to political corruption with *yi* (righteousness) and *xin* (integrity), meeting in the Peach Tree Garden to form an alignment to support their Emperor.

Also, relating Confucianism historically to *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is “The Notion of Appropriateness (*Yi*) in *Three Kingdoms*” by Jiyuan Yu who claims that the epic has a clear relationship to classical Confucianism’s conception of appropriateness.²⁵ The purpose of his study is to explain why there is a lack of specificity inherent within the value of appropriateness, a concept, he says, that illustrates the complexity of Confucianism. Yu’s goal is significant in that *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was instrumental in infusing Confucian precepts like appropriateness into the structure of the culture.²⁶ Yu claims that the capacity to discern what is proper while outside social constraints is important, although there is another view of appropriateness—a “cultivated [second] nature”—which determines how to internalize the ritual.²⁷ The author finds that the main characters of the epic are dealing with this second application, internalizing the ritual.²⁸ (For example, Liu Bei *should not* appropriate the land of particular lords, but he *must* do so to save his kingdom.) According to Yu, this rationale is as

²⁴ Ibid., p. 49.

²⁵ Jiyuan Yu, “The Notion of Appropriateness (*Yi*) in *Three Kingdoms*,” *Three Kingdoms and Chinese Culture* edited by Kimberly Besio and Constantine Tung (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 27.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 27

²⁷ Ibid., p. 28.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

vague in regard to specific choices at particular moments in the epic as it is in Confucianism itself. The relationship between friends and superiors is another area that is uncertain when it comes to this value of appropriateness, he says. In fact, this ambiguity creates a tension in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, placing characters like Liu Bei between the appropriateness accorded to kingship (“great appropriateness”) and that accorded to kinship (“small appropriateness”).²⁹ (See discussion of Lu Bu and Liu Bei in Chapters III and IV.) Yu’s explanation reveals such tensions as necessary to the greatness of the epic with its reliance on ambiguity and complexity. He contends that the literary value of the epic would be diminished without the resulting dilemmas and that, given the relationship between the philosophy and the text, the success of this historical novel may indicate that Confucianism, with its focus on the ambiguous nature of a “character and virtues of a moral agent, grasp[s] the true complexity of human ethical life.”³⁰

While there is no doubt that the philosophy is complex, Paul R. Golden disagrees with Yu's perceptions concerning ambiguity in "The Theme of Primacy of the Situation in Classical Chinese Philosophy and Rhetoric." According to Golden, *shu* (reciprocity) is misunderstood by Western scholars who believe it to mean equality in interactions. Instead, what is appropriate is determined by the social roles of those interacting, what he calls a "calculus of shu."³¹ While Golden does not directly address *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, his thesis relates to its characters and their actions and to Yu's thesis that what is appropriate action is often ambiguous in Confucianism. Golden's explanation both clarifies Yu's argument and reiterates the complexity of Confucianism.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 33.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 39.

³¹ Paul R. Golden, "The Theme of Primacy of the Situation in Classical Chinese Philosophy and Rhetoric," *Asia Minor* 18.2 (2005): pp. 2.

In addition to philosophical complexity, Hoyt Tillman's cause and effect study of the sometimes distorted manner in which historical record is shaped and reshaped in mainstream interpretations adds to our understanding of the novel. Tillman's article "Historic Analogies and Evaluative Judgments: Zhuge Liang as Portrayed in Chen Shou's 'Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms' and Pei Songzhi's *Commentary*" claims a Confucian influence on historical conceptions that eventually coalesce in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Tillman illustrates his claim by examining the perception of one character from the epic, Zhuge Liang—Liu Bei's faithful advisor. The author's theory is that analogies and metaphors used by historians tend to influence other historians' impressions or assumptions and that, because of this authorial intrusion, Zhuge's image as hero was incrementally elevated historically and allegorically from its most accurate evaluation as an effective Confucian administrator to the more impressive image of a sage.³² The author says that an unrealistic conception as recorded by Pei's *Commentary* overshadowed Chen's more realistic one.

Kim Besio also discusses Zhuge Liang and the way characters act or react in accordance to philosophical precepts in "Zhuge Liang and Zhang Fei: *Bowang shao tun* and Competing Masculine Ideals within the Development of the *Three Kingdoms* Story Cycle." She observes in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* the portrayal of two models of masculinity, honorable or unscrupulous, and studies the varying attitudes through the years about these notions. Besio chooses to examine two editions (from Yuan Dynasty 1271 to 1368 C.E. and from Ming Dynasty 1368–1644 C.E.) of one play from the story cycle, *zaju Boawang shao tun*.³³ The history of the

³² Hoyt Cleveland Tillman, "Historic Analogies and Evaluative Judgments: Zhuge Liang as Portrayed in Chen Shou's 'Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms': and Pei Songzhi's *Commentary*." *Oriens Extremus* 43 (2002): p. 70.

³³ Kim Besio, "Zhuge Liang and Zhang Fei, *Bowang shao tun* and Competing Masculine Ideals within the Development of the *Three Kingdoms* Story Cycle," *Three Kingdoms and Chinese*

variations between these versions reflects a pattern of modification of drama technique and of masculine ideals that relate to the formation of the novel itself, as “the characters tended to be reshaped to better accord with Confucian orthodox values.”³⁴ Zhuge Liang had been a hero during his life, and folk tradition portrayed him positively as one capable of magical feats. Conversely, historian Chen Shou (mentioned above) had recorded Zhang Fei as being a violent person.^{35*} The two characters continue to be opposites in all versions of the story, and their explicit contrast is especially suited to the stage. Besio finds that, over time, dramatic technique changed between the two versions of the *zaju* genre examined, and the changes affected cultural perceptions of the characters. During Yuan, the focus was on one character, Zhuge, whose motivations are revealed as more practical than his later interpreted ambitious self.³⁶ The author says that this later version supported the Ming imperial agenda due to its stress on loyalty to the throne by the beloved character and to its focus on his lofty ideals.³⁷ Besio argues that the Zhang model of belligerent masculinity in the play eventually became merely a foil for the more orthodox and rational seeming Zhuge, not only on stage but also in the novel.³⁸ Thus the model reinforces the text’s relationship to Confucian philosophy and *zhong yong* (the mean).

Similar to Besio’s study of a specific genre to illustrate its historical and philosophical relationship to the epic, Catherine Pagani’s “The Theme of *Three Kingdoms* in Chinese Popular Woodblock Prints” follows the development and social implications of *nianhua*,

Culture edited by Kimberly Besio and Constantine Tung (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 74.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 74.

* This was due to the reemergence of Confucian values and the perception that China had become weak when Buddhism or Daoism started to become somewhat influential. Therefore Ming drama was directly influenced by those in power, and they preferred the Confucian model.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 75.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 79.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 82.

woodblock–printed New Year's pictures). Pagani discusses the medium's connection to the dramatic versions of the epic, particularly a few popular and easily recognizable scenes from the book that “reinforced Confucian conceptions of moral goodness and moral badness central to Chinese culture.”³⁹ Pagani contends that *nianhua* and theater functioned together visually to “disseminate . . . ideas across Chinese culture” that represent the popular tastes of traditional China.⁴⁰ Because the wood blocks were inexpensive and involved low-levels of technology and cost, their depictions were especially useful in influencing the consciousness of non–literate citizens, reaffirming the social mores of the times—such as Confucian lessons on loyalty or dishonor as depicted in scenes such as “The Capture and Liberation of Cao Cao”⁴¹ (one of the two characters discussed at length in this study).

The characters that Pagani studies appear to be timeless, and in *Three Kingdoms* at the Dawn of the Twenty–First Century: The Shanghai *Jingju* Company's *Cao Cao and Yan Xiu*,” Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak relates that the resurgence of yet another ancient genre—*jingju* performance—proves this observation to be true and reveals the play’s success in not only reaching into the past but also revealing current dilemmas. This resurgence, she believes, gives encouragement to the future of the genre, as well as the continuation of the popularity of the epic itself. The playwright’s dilemma was to create characters that still represent the philosophical values of the original text, *de* (virtue) and *Tian ming* (the Mandate of Heaven).⁴²

³⁹ Catherine Pagani, “The Theme of *Three Kingdoms* in Chinese Popular Woodblock Prints,” *Three Kingdoms and Chinese Culture* edited by Kimberly Besio and Constantine Tung (Albany State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 103.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴² Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak, “*Three Kingdoms* at the Dawn of the Twenty–First Century: The Shanghai *Jingju* Company’s *Cao Cao and Yan Xiu*,” *Three Kingdoms and Chinese Culture*

Wichmann-Walczak points to the difficulty in creating an innovative reinterpretation, especially in the characterization of a modern Cao Cao. Elements of the play incorporate changes in the status quo—the setting and the musical score's “haunting classical flavor” (though quicker paced than in past versions) relies on tradition despite its innovations. These adaptations create what Wichmann-Walczak calls “contemporary Chinese emotionalism.”⁴³ This empathy for the characters in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is another layer of innovation for this prize-winning play. Playwright Yaxian Chen says there is an audience recognition that the play embodies “the principal Chinese weakness—one Chinese alone is great, but two will argue and destroy each other.”⁴⁴ His statement is reiterated by Wichmann-Walczak's recognition that Cao Cao's uncompromising character represents a timeless, universal political failure. Despite its creative departure from tradition, the play is “quite possibly closer to much older literary and historical views” of the characters and actions than some may realize, thus creating a cultural bridge for Confucianism and its twenty-first-century audience.⁴⁵

Dominic Cheung discusses a cultural bridge but one connecting the East and West in relation to the epic's tragic characteristics in “Essential Regrets: The Structure of Tragic Consciousness in *Three Kingdoms*.” The author argues that analyzing the disillusionment of the heroes' “tragic consciousness” in the novel reveals a historical pattern of regret, formulating a tragic outcome from non-fulfillment of expectations or events.⁴⁶ Cheung's thesis about the

edited by Kimberly Besio and Constantine Tung (Albany State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 111.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 115.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 117.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 120.

⁴⁶ Dominic Cheung, “Essential Regrets: The Structure of Tragic Consciousness in *Three Kingdoms*,” *Three Kingdoms and Chinese Culture* edited by Kimberly Besio and Constantine Tung (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 16.

pattern of regretful events is illustrated in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* through the actions of major characters like Zhuge Liang who eventually recognizes his own limited lifespan and realizes his inability to resist or reverse the Mandate of Heaven. Cheung compares the traditional conceptions of the Western tragic hero to the characteristics of the Eastern epic hero and finds that both share the flaw of “wrath.” Cheung counts more than one hundred examples of this flaw in the epic, finding a pattern of wrath in Cao Cao’s dealings with others, as well as with Liu Bei’s seeking revenge. The author offers a Freudian explanation of this aggressive tendency: The more an individual inhibits desire, the more a subconscious resistance to control arises, eventually erupting into wrathful action.⁴⁷ At the end of Han, he says strong ethical codes were necessary to control these brutal instincts by transforming them into friendships, like those leading to the catalysmic Peach Garden alliance mentioned earlier.⁴⁸

Related to the idea of this psychological interpretation of a traditional text and its Confucian influence, Jinhee Kim's study of “The Reception and the Place of *Three Kingdoms* in South Korea”⁴⁹ is significant in its focus on the reader, regardless of cultural background, as being the actual creator of meaning in any given text. Kim’s claim is based not only on the knowledge of the epic as literature or history but also on the knowledge of reader response or reception theory: A reader's mind is designed to fill inadvertent gaps it finds in any given text with his or her own cache of information. That information is culturally based, and therefore, the meaning of any text relies on the reader rather than authorial intentions.⁵⁰ Kim’s discussion

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

⁴⁹ Jinhee Kim, “The Reception and the Place of *Three Kingdoms* in South Korea,” *Three Kingdoms and Chinese Culture* edited by Kimberly Besio and Constantine Tung (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), pp. 143–146.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 147.

focuses on a particular set of readers: Asian, non-Chinese, specifically Korean—an audience that has claimed its own culturally based version of the epic since translations of the written text (*Samguk chi*) began appearing in the nineteenth-century. Scholars created this revisionist epic by finding non-traditional qualities in characters like Cao Cao who is seen—at least in the *Samguk chi* version—as a positive character, one who depends on his own hard work.⁵¹ Kim’s argument is that any given reader, as a producer of meaning, has the power to recreate *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* from his or her own worldview or philosophy.

Outside of the traditional philosophical studies of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* as a Chinese text, as I just mentioned, scholars from other Eastern cultures are examining their own versions of the epic in relation to the dissemination and influence of Chinese culture and philosophy. In her recent dissertation “The Ethical Principles in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*,” Waraporn Wiseitpanichkit categorizes ethical behaviors in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* as “translated sometime before 1808 C.E. by Chaophraya Praklang” for Siam’s King Rama I.⁵² Rama I’s purpose was to create a noble class that would not only understand military strategy but also know how to govern well and to follow the text’s lessons of loyalty.⁵³ She examines this agenda in relation to Confucian ethics (the ethics she says that underlie the Chinese text) and Buddhist ethics (which underlie the Thai translation). Wiseitpanichkit also provides examples of episodes that illustrate Confucian ethical principles like gratitude to family members and ancestors, respectfulness to seniority, or courteousness and mutual sympathy and understanding to all. The author likewise discusses and illustrates Buddhist values, such as

⁵¹ Ibid p.138.

⁵² Waraporn Wiseitpanichkit, “The Ethical Principles in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Ph.D. diss. Mahidol University, 2005. p. iv.

⁵³ Ibid., p. iv.

mercifulness, and emphasizes the continuing importance that *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* represents for Thai culture because the epic's moral lessons are encoded in the country's psyche, having been codified into Rama I's "translation" of Siam into Thailand. Relatedly, the author examines the textual history of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and its translation and the major philosophical beliefs portrayed in the original and the translated versions. Wiseitpanichkit's insights are those of an audience outside of the original "translated" culture of the text but also as one immersed in the philosophies of King Rama I's translated text.

Daoism

Like Confucianism, Daoism is a complex philosophy, but its followers do share the common values of moderation, humility, and compassion. They also share the ideal of living in harmony with the cosmos in order to maintain health and attain longevity. But Daoists have an aversion to Confucian ritual and order, instead finding the *Dao* (the way) through *wu wei* (action through inaction) or deeds harmonious with nature, rather than through status or authority. Daoism's focus is on the natural cycles and interactions of and with nature—*wuxing* (five movements), which are interdependent phases alternating in space and time consisting of earth (*tu*), metal (*jin*) water (*shui*), wood (*mu*), and fire (*huo*). Related to these interactions are the concepts of *yin* and *yang*, which are emblems of the *Dao* itself, in its harmonious interplay of opposites in the cosmos.⁵⁴

Daoist Interpretive Contexts

Jiang Sheng does not mention *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in "Early Religious Taoism and the Re-understanding of History of the Han through the Three Kingdoms."

Nevertheless Sheng's research does inform the study of modern philosophical discussions of the

⁵⁴ "Taoism," *Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Chad Hanson. Feb. 19, 2003. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/taoism/>. March 5, 2011.

epic because his work offers insight into the political, social, and philosophical interactions during the time the original story takes place. Over time, Sheng says, these interactions culminated in early religious Daoism, which was “the outcome of a movement originating in the inner structure of Qin–Han society that in turn exerted a considerable [influence in] the social and political order from the Han to the Wei.”⁵⁵ The author points to Lawrence Schneider’s discussion on the merging of doctrines such as the Interaction between Heaven and Man and the Cycling of the Virtues of the Five Elements (a system designed to challenge the claims to the Mandate of Heaven based on the “rotation” of the elements identified as belonging to a particular historical timeframe).⁵⁶ This identification of each virtue with a historical era, Sheng says, was used as an “ideological [tool] for the interpretation of . . . orthodox ideas and politics.”⁵⁷ (See Chapter IV.) The synthesis of doctrines resulted in the theory of Catastrophism, which came to dominate the ideology of the Han dynasty and therefore is an important factor relating to modern philosophical discourse concerning *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. To eliminate the tension between Heaven and man was of utmost importance for Catastrophists, and Han emperors proclaimed their own flaws, to “dispel catastrophes [such as floods or earthquakes] through certain subjective acts.”⁵⁸ Sheng calls this philosophical mode of thinking “one of the most important intellectual causes for the birth of religious Taoism.”⁵⁹

Especially interesting for the present study, Catastrophism influenced “the political life in

⁵⁵ Jiang Sheng, “Early Religious Taoism and the Re-understanding of History of the Han through the Three Kingdoms.” *Social Sciences in China* 23, no. 2 (2002): p. 76.

⁵⁶ Laurence A. Schneider, *Ku Chieh-Kang and China’s New History: Nationalism and the Quest for Alternative Traditions* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971), p. 233, quoted in Sheng, p. 78.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

the Han dynasty.”⁶⁰ The author finds that doubts concerning the righteousness of the Han regime were based on systematic catastrophes, “religious interpretation in early Taoist scripture,” and eschatological beliefs of the time. Rebellions or subversions can be viewed as the people’s attempts to survive and as indicative of “the spirituality of the society, from the emperor to the ordinary people,” which formulated a state religion developed under the stresses of a dynamically changing society.^{61*} Therefore the politicization of religion through symbolic association (“only the *yellow* earth has the virtue to dispel the flood” [my emphasis]) set the stage for the events that would be related eventually to readers of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.⁶² The association also explains the logic for Cao Cao’s suppression of the Yellow Turban Uprising, his uniting with the rebels’ surviving forces, and later his overthrowing Liu Xian’s Daoist regime, followed by his son (Cao Pi) founding Wei, “[t]he dynasty that comes to follow heaven’s order. . . .”⁶³

Robert Gray also discusses Daoist influence in “An Analysis of the Role of *QI* in Military Strategy as Outlined in *Three Kingdoms (Sanguo Yanyi)*. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* has affected not only the Chinese culture in general but also its training in military strategies and tactics. Gray's discussion of the concept of *qi* (energy) in the epic reveals that the “Daoist–influenced principles” of one of the epic's major sources have similarities to Sunzi’s

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 76.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 77. *The author cites on page 78 Kobayashi Masami’s conclusion that the concept of *Zhongmin* (men of the seed or “the Elect”) is not found in Daoist documents prior to the early years of the Eastern Jin dynasty. It is important to note because this concept of “the seed” does not exist outside of eschatology—with its prophesying of catastrophes, such as the destruction of all living things (by flood) or the collapse of the universe and with its select group of “the good” chosen to survive.

⁶² Ibid., p. 79.

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 79–83.

philosophy in his *The Art of War*.⁶⁴ Particularly, Gray focuses on the military decisions or strategies within the storyline that relate to the concept of manipulating *qi* to gain advantage over one's foes. In *The Art of War* (500 BC), the idea of *qi* as an emotional state of the troops was first acknowledged, and in *Sanguo Yanyi*, the manipulation of *qi* is displayed on numerous occasions with expected outcomes. Gray's contention is that the repeated lessons within *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* were more effective to their enculturation than any of the actual military texts that pragmatically list and discuss strategies.

To illustrate his thesis, Gray contrasts instances in the novel when leaders use superior or inferior tactics in relation to *qi*, the most obvious being the tactic of controlling emotion. Through examples found in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* of tactics designed to suspend rational thought, Gray explains that the manipulation of *qi* requires the rational analyses of strengths and weaknesses. The author also equates *qi* to modern gaming theory, which is based on going beyond self awareness in order to understand what others may think and do, a characteristic trait reflecting what Gray calls Sunzi's "Daoist-influenced principles" found in *The Art of War*—"subtle! Subtle! . . . approach[ing] the formless."⁶⁵

Gray's purpose in his study concerning *qi* in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is to understand the military lessons of Sunzi's "effortless effort" found in the novel and to "elucidate the strategic traditions found throughout Chinese military history."⁶⁶ More significantly, he finds the epic to be a template illustrating the ways the Chinese think about strategic issues in general and shaping the decisions they have made or followed throughout generations.

⁶⁴ Robert Gray, "The Role of *Qi* in Military Strategy as Outlined in *Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo Yanyi*)," *B.C. Asian Review* 9 (Winter 1995–1996): p. 89.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Legalism

Just as Confucianism and Daoism are complex philosophies with core precepts, so, too, is the School of Law (*Fa chia*) or Legalism. According to Arthur Waley, Legalists were China's first political philosophers who "[started] not from where society ought to be but how it is."⁶⁷ The basic tenet for Legalists is that "good government depends . . . [not] on the moral worth of persons, but on the functioning of sound institutions," and these institutions require conformity.⁶⁸ Therefore, a ruler's "knowledge, ability, moral worth, warrior spirit . . . are wholly irrelevant; he simply performs his function in the impersonal mechanism of state."⁶⁹ According to A. C. Graham, Legalists work from a cause and effect model based on Seven Standards: equally balanced principles (*tse*), standards (*fa*), "measuring and likening to oneself" (*shu*), consistencies or statistics (*Shi*) exemplars or models (*hsiang*), habituating or transforming, and incentives and deterrents.⁷⁰ Without benevolent considerations, standards for behavior drive systematic reward or punishment by and for the state.

Legalist Interpretive Context

Antonio Michael Carmone's 1978 dissertation, "The Literary and Philosophical Values in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*" focuses mainly on the narrative elements of the epic. Although he finds influences from Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism in seemingly fragmented episodes which may appear to be unrelated to one another, he states that they are interrelated by conflicts that arise throughout the story. Moreover, conflicting ideologies are integral to the overall conflicts that arise in the narrative. Carmone discusses the difficult

⁶⁷ Arthur Waley, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Publishing, 1956), p. 15.

⁶⁸ A. C. Graham, *Disputers of Dao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing, 1989), p. 268.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 268, 274.

situations in which characters find themselves when caught between more than one philosophical belief. He says that the reader can become pessimistic while reading *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* if focused on only the Legalist predatory purposes of characters like Cao Cao or Sun Qian who use righteousness and patriotism as smokescreens for ambition.⁷¹ The author posits that Luo Guanzhong may have wished that his readers would examine the repercussions of the “civilized” Legalists’ principles in “contrast with those of the naked ‘barbarians.’”⁷² The mechanical and rigid rule of law appears to justify the atrocities committed by the eunuchs at the beginning of the story and throughout. But regardless of its realistic portrayal of the worst of human nature, the author says that the epic counters this view with the “consistency in noble deeds and words on the part of such people” as Zhuge Liang, Liu Bei, or Zhang Fei, which places the novel back into the realm of Confucianism.⁷³

Although modern Western readers often wish to associate Legalism with Chinese culture in its historical texts, it is important to realize that the majority of representative sinologists I have discussed do not find *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* to be based on Legalism, regardless of modern political realities and interpretations. As Jinhee Kim and Waraporn Wiseitpanichkit reveal, interpretation is often culturally based. This is especially true of those who are not necessarily historians or scholars. Therefore, the somewhat misconceived Western interpretation of the novel as Legalistic is most likely due to superimposing modern cultural notions onto a medieval text. Because I will be discussing the philosophical influences *The Art of War* exerts on *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and because the interpretation of *The Art of*

⁷¹ Antonio Michael Carmone, “The Literary and Philosophical Values in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*,” *Unitas* 51.2 (June 1978): p 287.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 284.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

War can affect Western readers' interpretations of the epic, my next chapter is a discussion of Western conceptions and misconceptions of Sunzi's *The Art of War*.

Chapter II

The Art of War and Western Leadership Practices

Most Westerners are more comfortable with blogs or video games than with ancient Chinese texts. But among the modern readers who have examined *The Art of War* in relation to its use for development or justification of aggressive Western business management practices, a common thread of agreement exists. Sunzi's message is a significant source of insight into successful leadership strategies. However, an additional theme that emerges among sinologists is that Sunzi's text has been misinterpreted or misrepresented by Westerners. Within this group are those who agree that without understanding the underlying philosophies of *The Art of War* and without recognizing or acknowledging cultural bias, much of the past century's scientifically researched corporate techniques based on Sunzi's statements are out of context of both the text and its derivative culture. In this chapter, I explain a representative selection of criticism and interpretation of Sunzi's philosophical design by Hai-Fa Sun, Chao-Chuan Chen, and Shi-He Zhang in "Strategic Leadership of Sunzi in the *Art of War*"; by Richard G. Ang in "Winning People in Leadership Using Sun Zi's *Art of War*"; by Marc Winter in "Suggestions for a Re-Interpretation of the Concept of *Wu Xing* in the *Sunzi bingfa*, and by Sandra Wawrytko in "Winning Ways: The Viability (*Dao*) and Virtuosity (*De*) of Sunzi's *Methods of Warfare (Bingfa)*."

Hai-Fa Sun, Chao-Chuan Chen, and Shi-He Zhang claim in "Strategic Leadership in the *Art of War*" that preconceptions of proper leadership models color Occidental interpretation of *The Art of War*'s directives. The three authors examine the qualities of effective and ineffective leadership in relationship to Sunzi's teachings and explore what they call his strategic situationalism in light of his beliefs regarding humaneness, holism, and dialecticism in relation to our contemporary global situation. The authors place Sunzi in the Warring States Period, with its deconstruction of central government and its dependence on severe laws to maintain order.

Related to this required maintenance of order was the States' creation of professional armies employing conscripted peasants who were led by elite specialists. Sun, Chen, and Zhang maintain that the creation of these armies was similar to the modern development of independent Western-style corporations run by professional management teams.⁷⁴ What is dissimilar is significant, however, because Sunzi's culture constrained him with the philosophies prevalent during his lifetime (primarily Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism) and from which the author drew to create his unique, brief, and significant text on leadership. The authors say that Sunzi inherently relied upon the Confucian precepts of benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety, and wisdom to develop his strategies, just as he assumed Daoism's basic dialectic of *yin* and *yang* and the strategic use of natural elements (earth, fire, water, metal, and wood) in warfare. To these philosophical influences Sunzi added the Legalist concepts of law, authority, and tactics.⁷⁵

To illustrate, the first *Pian* (chapter) in *The Art of War* utilizes all three philosophies to establish the direction of the entire work: "the Confucian *Dao* of benevolence, the Daoist *Dao* of dialecticism in the strategies, and the Legalistic prescriptions" for the logistics of a military campaign.⁷⁶ Here Sunzi addresses the mission of war as "a matter of life and death" and the method of accomplishing this mission as a matter of strategy rather than direct aggression. The bulk of the text is the description of the strategies of organization, coordination, control, and motivation. The three authors find that Sunzi's strategies are successful because of the practice of "strategic leadership," a concept that reflects the "institutional perspective" of a community of

⁷⁴ Hai-Fa Sun, Chen Chao-chuan, and She-He Zhang, "Strategic Leadership of Sunzi in the *Art of War*," *Leadership and Management in China: Philosophies, Theories, and Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 145.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 144–145.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

alliances, rather than a simple subordinate and management relationship.⁷⁷ Although unacknowledged or misrepresented in much popular literature, Sunzi's leadership ideal is based on the humanistic purpose of benevolence, "service to the community at large," and ethical actions that encourage the support of the people, such as a defensive focus and a goal of winning over the enemy rather than seeking its annihilation.⁷⁸ These three factors coalesce in a hierarchical authority that can *allow* the autonomy of subordinates. The leader leads by encouraging those beneath him "to follow the Way (*Dao*) rather than the whims of the sovereign and by treating soldiers like parents should treat children."⁷⁹ The authors believe that Sunzi's comprehensiveness (his listings throughout *The Art of War*) and his holistic view of the "constituent elements within and across systems" are the factors that allow leaders to "maximize and leverage" situations and "minimize the effects of constraints."⁸⁰ Moreover, this holistic viewpoint relates to the dialecticism of *yin* and *yang*, oppositional forces that produce all that we can know, including war—which Sunzi addresses with this dualistic approach: Know yourself and know your enemy, then strategize accordingly.⁸¹ Sun, Chen, and Zhang say that his technique is successful because "[d]ialecticism encourages holistic thinking so as to be in touch with the full reality, and at the same time it motivates activism and proactivity to influence and leverage a situation. . . ."⁸² Therefore, Sunzi's leadership style is situational, influenced by external elements (environment or terrain) and internal elements (motivation of the troops). Rather than placing the burden of success upon his troops, a leader should depend, instead, on

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 153. Also, see situation making (*zhao shi*) and situation adaptation (*yin shi*), p. 160.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 155.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 155.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 156.

⁸¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 84.

⁸² Sun, Chen, and Zhang, p. 157.

his own capacity to manipulate their deployment in particularized situations.

The ideal leader must have the wisdom to creatively interpret situations and deploy his followers. Of the five attributes that Sunzi lists for his generals, wisdom is the most prominent. For Sunzi, wisdom, unlike intelligence, would entail a broad knowledge of the mission of war, an understanding of the *Dao* (knowledge of both advantages and disadvantages), the recognition of changing situations, and the ability to manipulate and maintain the troops' loyalty.⁸³ On the other hand, there are five characteristics of a leader and/or his troops that will lead to defeat: Those ready to die can be killed; those afraid to die can be killed; those quick to anger can be shamed; those who are sanctimonious can be disgraced, and those who love people can be disgraced.⁸⁴ The authors state that this list is often seen as "character flaws," but these traits are actually "cognitive and emotional errors committed in response to extremely turbulent and volatile situations."⁸⁵ In other words, they are most likely situational characteristics, and therefore can be eliminated by strategic leadership with a dualistic view of aligning the aforementioned traits with others (for instance, courage linked to wisdom or benevolence with discipline) for the benefit of the collective organization.⁸⁶ This management technique is seen by the authors as a potential building block in cross-cultural management relationship and system-level adaptations of business practices for the global market.⁸⁷ Yet, a significant issue raised by their examination of strategic situationalism is determining whether it is situation or individualized characteristics that drive behavior. While many in the west believe that Sunzi's attributes are readily applicable to capitalistic management practices, Sun, Chen, and Zhang

⁸³ Ibid., p. 159.

⁸⁴ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Boston: Shambhala Press, 2005), p. 114.

⁸⁵ Sun, Chen, and Zhang, p. 160.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 161.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 166.

stress that strategic leadership is based on the positional advantage of terrain (*di shi*), the power of the situation, rather than the traditional reliance in Western cultures on individualized acts of bravery on the part of the troops.⁸⁸ Without an understanding of the philosophies that underpin *The Art of War*, unnecessary sacrifices to gain the field of victory on the battlefield—or in the board room—will continue to be the trademark of Western corporate structures.

In contrast to Sun, Chen, and Zhang's cautiously nuanced study, "Winning People in Leadership Using Sun Zi's *Art of War*" by Richard G. Ang is a simplistic and culturally biased lesson on "How to Succeed in Business" for one newly advanced into management. Ang attempts to justify typical Western business leadership practices by citing Sunzi's rules, and the result is quite problematic. Ang dismisses the literal meaning of "war," as well as Sunzi's mission of saving the state, and redefines the term as an individual's "inner struggles, personal circumstances, conflict within an organization he or she is affiliated with, or a partnership conflict." The author leaps to the conclusion that all this individualized conflict and disharmony must be controlled by a "steely determination to achieve victory" by employing Sunzi's strategies and tactics.⁸⁹ On one hand, Ang suggests that individuals should be left alone to do the tasks they were hired to do, relating to Sunzi's directives in his third chapter, "Offensive Strategy."⁹⁰ On the other hand, the author undermines this dictum when he suggests to the newly promoted that if they do not know what they are doing to remember Sunzi's statement that "all warfare is based on deception," concluding that "when incapable, feign capacity."⁹¹ In reality, Sunzi does not say this, but he *does* say that "[w]hen someone whose wisdom is inadequate

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 161.

⁸⁹ Ang, Richard G., "Winning People in Leadership Using Sun Zi's *Art of War*." *Philippiniana sacra* 41, no. 122 (2006): p. 430.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 433.

⁹¹ Sun Tzu, Griffith, p. 66.

commands the army it is conceit. . . . only a general who knows the Tao is capable.”⁹² Although Ang cites this statement, he does not appear to understand it—or the magnitude of his own lack of cultural awareness in regard to Sunzi’s philosophical and martial preparations: “It is advisable for the new leader to undergo a *leadership training program*,” he says [my emphasis].⁹³

Another misrepresentation of Sunzi’s lessons can be found when Ang suggests that leaders should cultivate the semblance that employees are associates rather than subordinates.⁹⁴ This practice is formulated to portray equal footing and interests, and it is a common one in the predominantly democratic West since the early 1970’s, but it is not representative of Sunzi’s commanding leadership philosophy.⁹⁵ Ang also informs the reader that spending quality time with underlings will instill loyalty, ludicrously citing Sunzi: “[the leader] treats [his followers] as his own beloved sons and they will stand by him unto death.”⁹⁶ Is there any employee who would follow his boss into a life or death battle because they have chatted about the previous weekend’s activities? What Ang does convey effectively is the necessity of a new leader to accomplish his goals. To do so, he or she must ensure the loyalty of those who will be doing all the work. Unfortunately for his claim of innovative discovery, his common Western leadership philosophy is more apparent than is Sunzi’s: “Let [the subordinates] do the legwork and be at the background. If something goes wrong, they are blamed. If everything goes well, the leader gets the credit. So a good leader should be visible but uninvolved.”⁹⁷ But in actuality, Sunzi says just the opposite—a leader at times must “*feign inactivity* [my emphasis].”⁹⁸

⁹² Sun-tzu, Sawyer and Sawyer, p. 166.

⁹³ Ang, p. 436.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 440.

⁹⁸ Sun-tzu, Sawyer and Sawyer, p. 168.

Should the newly appointed leader find enemies in his organization, those who are disgruntled and who are adversarial to *his or her leadership* (not Sunzi's enemy to the survival of the state), Ang suggests either democratically inspired participative administration to encourage compliance or the undermining of the dissidents in the eyes of other employees. And if those tactics do not achieve victory, one should confuse the enemy by "treating him with benevolence" to throw him off track, as if Sunzi's understanding of "benevolence" was like a poison ivy ointment to be applied or merely a polite interchange at the coffee shop. To complete his subversion of Sunzi's philosophy, Ang further states, "If one cannot have a head on [sic] collision with the 'enemy,' then killing him softly with kindness is the *next best alternative* [emphasis mine]"—a statement which circumscribes Sunzi's ultimate victory—survival through non-engagement with enemy forces.⁹⁹

The author unintentionally does come to the justifiable conclusion that in our postmodern world, "very different from the China of old," Sunzi's teaching remains relevant. Unfortunately, Ang does not appear to have a very sophisticated understanding of *The Art of War*. Moreover, he has superficially applied its teachings to justify common, staid management practices in the west. And although he advises the new leader to learn his or her *corporation's* history, Ang has failed to understand that "the China of old" and its philosophies relating to Sunzi's lessons are the *only* reasons that *The Art of War* can be looked upon as a viable resource for leadership today.¹⁰⁰

Ang's superficial, spray-painted application of *The Art of War* to disguise an unattractive business model is quite the opposite of Marc Winter's fine brush stroke in his "Suggestions for a Re-Interpretation of the Concept of *Wu xing* in *Sunzi bingfa*." Winter's examination of a singular term serves to demonstrate why historical context is of paramount importance to understanding

⁹⁹ Ang., p. 339.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 441.

Sunzi and why even those with extensive knowledge about his text may misunderstand *The Art of War*'s philosophy and message. Through the ages, arguments about the date of composition, authorship, or style have multiplied and access to intellectual concepts from feudal societies and the Imperial age have not been readily available until relatively recent archeological findings. More often than not, scholars focused on the conspicuous for examination or research—such as terms or phrases that could have appeared only during particular eras—and this knowledge has created controversial theories that may become traditional ones, such as Robin Yates's beliefs that editors or copyists edited *The Art of War* to fit the aesthetic ideal of their times or that the text is a result of additions from different centuries.¹⁰¹ Because he also calls for a re-evaluation of the ancient text outside of its “pre-established intellectual categories” in order to see beyond what others have already seen,¹⁰² Winter's study relates to Sun, Chen, and Zhang's calling for reconceptualization based on Sunzi's philosophy because both arguments have a practical application for today's scholars and business leaders.

Winter's argument is that *The Art of War* is a coherent text created by one author, and his evidence lies in the etymology of *wuxing*. The term is typically interpreted and translated to mean “five phases” with an attendant meaning of cosmological interaction between heaven and earth and with the sense of “overcoming versus coming forth (*shen* vs. *sheng*).”¹⁰³ Winter challenges this notion by citing a study by Christopher Rand who finds that it was not until after the third century B.C.E. in China that man and cosmos were believed to be directly connected.

¹⁰¹ Robin D. S. Yates, “New Light on Ancient Chinese Military Texts: Notes on Their Nature and Evolution, and the Development of Military Specialization in Warring States China,” *T'oung-pao* LXXIX (1988): p. 219, quoted in Marc Winter, “Suggestions for a Reinterpretation of the Concept of *Wu xing* in the *Sunzi bingfa*.” *Bulletin* 76 (2004): pp. 149–150.

¹⁰² Marc Winter, “Suggestions for a Reinterpretation of the Concept of *Wu xing* in the *Sunzi bingfa*.” *Bulletin* 76 (2004): p. 150.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

Therefore, Winter claims that Sunzi was speaking metaphorically of the five known planets “as mere images to illustrate and exemplify his rational arguments in regard to constant change.”¹⁰⁴

Winter cites A. C. Graham who states that such correlative thought was part of a tradition of metaphorizing in “non-philosophical texts”—texts, which Winter notes, were written and used by technical specialists such as astronomers or physicians to illustrate their ideas (which Winter says is the same technique found in *The Art of War*).¹⁰⁵ Winter also cites John Major who believes the planets referred to the gods in the Chinese “Grand Origin Myth,” and that these “cosmic paradigms [were] abstracted into a philosophical principle (*wu hsing*), during the Warring States Period (480–221 B.C.E.).¹⁰⁶ Afterward, cosmological correlation became more and more prevalent, from the Yellow Emperor’s medical treatises (*Huangdi neijing*) to the pentatonic scale, and at the end of the period, Zou Yan’s politicization of *wuxing* by equating the phases with dynasties and their legitimacy (or lack thereof).¹⁰⁷

Winter’s claim that, to Sunzi, *wuxing* meant “five planets” deconstructs the term’s anachronistic association to the cosmological stance that observations in nature are parallel to human experience and understanding. Unlike the diurnal “patterns” of the sun, during Sunzi’s lifetime, the planets did not appear to have a particular pattern, so the five planets became his metaphor of constant change.¹⁰⁸ The summation of Sunzi’s famous water metaphor concerning form and military engagement relates to the necessity of adaptation to the constant unknown: “He, who can modify his tactics in relation to his opponent and thereby succeed in winning, may

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 152.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 154.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 153. According to Major, “*Hsing* has two meanings, “to move” and “a row or column.” The five planets answer both of those definitions: [as “stars that move”] and as “five planets [that] lined up in a row at the beginning of an epoch of time.”

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 162.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 163.

be called a heaven-born captain. Therefore: among the Five planets none is ahead of the others always. . . .”¹⁰⁹

The colors of these planets eventually became associated with “five elements” on earth; and in association, eventually the misinterpretation of “five phases” of change for “five planets” became codified in *The Art of War* scholarship. But Winter says the five-phase model of correlative connections did not develop until after Warring States.¹¹⁰ To Sunzi, the five planets, tastes, sounds, or colors were examples of the ways a limited number of elements could be combined to create numerous varieties or opportunities for success. Likewise, Winter’s examination of only one term suggests that *The Art of War* studies offer numerous opportunities for philosophical and historical inquiry. Even with ancient or modern misconceptions superimposed on the text, sinologists may utilize the twenty-first century’s international focus on it to create knowledge that could promote practical and ethical applications of successful global leadership practices.

Like Winter’s particularized study, Sandra Wawrytko’s “Winning Ways: The Viability (*Dao*) and Virtuosity (*De*) of Sunzi’s *Methods of Warfare (Bingfa)*” challenges common notions about *The Art of War*, especially Western conceptions of Chinese culture as being warlike and war loving, as Richard G. Ang implies (above). Instead, Wawrytko claims that Sunzi was a “proponent of peace” and that many of those who share Ang’s viewpoint of Chinese culture have been influenced by an uninformed analysis of *The Art of War*, based on a misconception of the term “art” being assumed to mean a created beauty. Instead *fa* is closer in meaning to “law” or “method,” and closer to a derivative of *ars*, a skill, which, according to Sunzi, should be used

¹⁰⁹ Lionel Giles, *Sun Tzu on The Art of War: The Greatest Military Treatise in the World* (Taipei: Literature House, Ltd., 1964), pp. 35–37.

¹¹⁰ Winters, p. 169.

with much care and foresight.¹¹¹ The original meaning most likely was not lost on the *The Art of War* French Jesuit translator in 1772,¹¹² but few who have read the English version today understand the subtleties of the title, easily comparing it with Westerner Niccolo Machiavelli's famous conceptual treatise, *Art of War*.

This misalignment of meaning came naturally to a culture that would typically have little awareness of Daoism, a philosophy, Wawrytko says, which underscores Sunzi's own beliefs about casualties and warfare. Although her study focuses on pervasive militarism in Western culture, her work has implications for business practices, which are often modeled on military constructs. The author acknowledges scholars who have already examined Western misrepresentations of *The Art of War* and who have concluded that Sunzi's teachings have been "manipulated to suit the biases of [any] interpreter," who wished to succeed at any cost.¹¹³ Instead, Wawrytko studies the philosophical underpinning of *The Art of War* to better understand this Occidental manipulation of meaning. She concludes that Sunzi's "philosophy constitutes an Applied Daoism."¹¹⁴ The author categorizes Sunzi's positive Daoist traits, such as his agenda for stemming the proliferation of armed conflict "without succumbing to *bu wei* pacificism," and his weaker or less developed characteristics, such as his inferior virtuosity (*de*)—due to his reliance on foreknowledge as a form of cunning intellect (*zhihui*), on human nature instead of the expansiveness of nature (*ziran*) that *dao* emulates, and on human artifice.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Sandra A. Warwrytko, "Winning Ways: The Viability (*Dao*) and Virtuosity (*De*) of Sunzi's *Methods of Warfare (Bingfa)*," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 34, no. 4 (Dec. 2007): p. 563.

¹¹² Joseph Marie Amiot, *L'art militaire dans l'antiquite chinoise; une doctrine de guerre bi-millenaire*, tire de la traduction du P. Amiot (1772) (Paris: C. Lavauzelle & Cie., 1922). See also "Confucianism and Western Democracy" by Herrlee Glessner Creel in *Confucius and the Chinese Way* (1949): pp. 254–279.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 564. Warwrytko refers to Roger Ames and Alastair Ian Johnston as examples.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 568.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 575.

This applied philosophy directly relates to one of the most often quoted sections of *The Art of War*: “Warfare is the Tao of deception.”¹¹⁶ Both Sunzi and Laozi, author of the *Daodejing*, recognize that most individuals tend to live in a shallow reality, rarely looking below the surface for profound insights about their lives. And Sunzi utilizes—or applies—this human inclination to misdirect the enemy for his followers’ own survival. Because of the magnitude of this duty, the commander is the champion (*fu*) of his followers,¹¹⁷ placing himself between danger to the State and the State, necessitating his possession of specific qualities associated with Daoist beliefs: wisdom (*zhi*), trustworthiness (*xin*), humaneness (*ren*), courage (*yong*), conscientiousness (*yan*), and the “dao of management” (*fa*),¹¹⁸ as well as the discernment to ignore political directives that would undermine the survival of the State.¹¹⁹

Warwrytko explains that Sunzi assesses the strengths of his opponents according to categories relating to his strategy for survival: community commitment (*dao*), climate (*tian*), terrain (*di*), leadership (*jiang*), and methodology (*fa*). Of these strategic factors, *dao* is the most significant, but it has been misinterpreted as “moral cause or moral law,” she says. In the life and death battle for which Sunzi prepares, the *dao* is synonymous with a *high level of morale*, which elicits the leader’s identical commitment from the people—so much so that they do not fear death when bound to this common cause. This capacity to move beyond individual interest is related to why *Ang*’s facile applications of the ideals of *The Art of War* to the Western competitive managerial environment fail to provide innovative leadership practices. In fact, one of the most significant points that Warwrytko makes in relation to business practices is that the idea of competition, so acculturated in Western minds, is found in neither Daoism nor *The Art of*

¹¹⁶ Sun-tzu, Sawyer and Sawyer, p. 168.

¹¹⁷ Warwrytko, p. 567.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 571.

¹¹⁹ Sun-tzu, Sawyer and Sawyer, p. 215.

War: “The Sage’s *Dao* accomplishes without competing,” says Laozi—and is accomplished by Sunzi’s ideal leader’s *wu wei* victory.¹²⁰ (Although Ang equates *wu wei* to “inaction,” the author uses Roger T. Ames’s translation: “nonassertive or noncoercive action.”¹²¹)

Warwrytko explains that the *Daodejing* teaches that “[t]hose who covet the state cannot protect it and are doomed to failure” and that “[t]he intrusive behavior of the elite makes people ‘difficult to rule.’”¹²² In other words, those who compete in order to control others for their individualized interests cannot be bound to a communal mission or elicit the high morale of subordinates. Unlike Sunzi, such leaders do not value the lives of those whom they seek to control but see them as expendable commodities to be used to gain ever more power and “commodities.”

Warwrytko believes that due to their selfish fetish for conspicuous consumption, Westerners do not take death seriously, even in their increasingly precious leisure time playing costly videogames that “ever escalate death and destruction.”¹²³ Nevertheless, the author is hopeful that Sunzi’s philosophy and methodology can be utilized by leaders from the west to seriously reevaluate their definitions of “success,” as well as the practices that achieve it. Besides her discussion concerning the necessity for a leader to inspire a high level of morale in his subordinates, in regard to limiting liabilities in a life or death struggle, the author stresses the necessity for leaders to possess the traits (mentioned earlier) of wisdom (*zhi*), trustworthiness (*xin*), humaneness (*ren*) courage, (*yong*), conscientiousness (*yan*), and skill (*fa*)¹²⁴ However, each of these characteristics must be developed individually and honed throughout a lifetime. None of

¹²⁰ Warwrytko, p. 579.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 571.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 570

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 573.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 566. In Chapter 8 of *The Art of War*, Sunzi lists the opposite factors as characteristics of poor leadership.

them can be learned in a training seminar as Ang suggests, and all of them relate to what many Westerners incorrectly already believe constitutes a significant portion of their identities, without having earnestly cultivated these traits. This is true most likely because they are too busy trying to fulfill their societies' expectations for and definitions of success—a pursuit, at present, designed as a “lose–lose” situation for the majority. Business leaders often mimic the intensity of the battlefield to promote competition and incentive, and because capitalism is the underpinning of most Western countries, everyone within these societies is affected.

Unfortunately Warwrytko fails to acknowledge that a vacuum exists where Westerners should find the introspection and awareness required to find the Way. The vessel has been depleted as a result of the decreasing rewards for popularly degraded analytical and intellectual pursuits and the increasing status of those who embrace readily available, comfortable, and *acceptable* anti-intellectual activities. Western culture in general denies the cerebral and glorifies and celebrates competition—with the result that too few individuals realize that “Mission Accomplished!” banners are inappropriate because, as Sunzi says, “war is to be treated as a funeral rite / After multitudes have been slaughtered.”¹²⁵ Competition and militarism are embedded into the Western world view.

Can Sunzi's text be helpful to Western leaders who seem oblivious to seeing themselves as others see them or who seek strategies that can be easily downloaded into an outdated “How to Succeed in Business” manual? Warwrytko finds that *The Art of War's* directives accomplish their goals as long as leadership has a grasp of its underlying premises. Her work offers insight into the Chinese culture as one that would pursue a harsh military option as a last resort, rather than as having a brash, imperious marshal constitution that popular interpretations of Sunzi's

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 571.

work have established. The Western workforce may not have spent years cultivating the Daoist characteristics she believes to be the key to success, but if it is encouraged to read her study, it would be an excellent beginning to develop understanding that can lead eventually to innovative business strategies.

Such innovation is needed because the global market is a reality, along with its mega-corporations competing for market dominance. Will they prove Karl Marx right? Will capitalism collapse upon itself as large, wealthy corporations grow ever more powerful and wealthy—eventually demoting middle-class small business owners to one powerful and disgruntled working class of subordinates? We have the borderless opportunity as historians to examine the nuances of *The Art of War* and to explain them to those who need to hear them—a win-win situation. Therefore in my next chapter, I will discuss the philosophical connections between *The Art of War* and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a classic Oriental text with increasingly popular appeal to the Occidental world, and provide episodic illustrations as a means to a revision of Western interpretations of the popular historical novel.

Chapter III

“To Serve the State and Save the People

Luo Guanzhong's *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is an increasingly popular book in the twenty-first century, in part because the work relates to modern strategic leadership, Chinese culture, and military engagement. Because of its martial context, the work seems to embody the tactics found in Sunzi's *The Art of War*. To understand both works and the culture that produced them—and that continues to be influenced by the philosophies represented in them—it is helpful to examine the concept of benevolence, a significant philosophical connection between *The Art of War* and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* that serves to illustrate the *Dao* of administration necessary for successful leadership and for the survival of the state.

Winning Hearts

As mentioned in Chapter II, Hai-Fa Sun, Chao-chuan Chen, and She-He Zhang claim that Sunzi himself was a product of three philosophies—“the Confucian *Dao* of benevolence, the Daoist *Dao* of dialecticism (*yin* and *yang*) in the strategies, and the Legalistic prescriptions for the logistics of a military campaign.”¹²⁶ In other words, the philosophies harmoniously coexist for Sunzi in what the three call situational Daoism, which relates to a strategic leadership dependant on a community of alliances rather than simple hierarchal relationships.¹²⁷ (See Chapter II and below.)

Sunzi's primary focus is to save the state from destruction, and, in order to do this, he must be the type of leader the troops will trust to avoid unnecessary carnage and will follow into battle. This warrior knows that it is of utmost importance to “[establish] a mutual relationship

¹²⁶ Carmone, p. 326.

¹²⁷ Sun, Chao-chuan, and Zhang, p. 153. (strategic situationalism in light of his beliefs regarding humaneness, holism, and dialecticism)

with the people.”¹²⁸ To accomplish this, he knows that a great leader must win the hearts of his followers prior to stepping onto a field of battle. Of the factors that he says are necessary to win battles, the great leader must possess the most significant one, the balance of the *Dao*. With this connection with the cosmos, one will have the advantages of “heaven and earth” and model benevolence, a characteristic that relates directly to the other four factors: wisdom, credibility, courage, and strictness. It is benevolence, the human factor, which separates and defines *The Romance of the Three Kingdom’s* Liu Bei and Cao Cao.

Benevolence has been defined as being “a man’s whole hearted and joyful concern for other men, his delight in their good fortune and dislike of their misfortune.”¹²⁹ With this attitude, Sunzi knows that the people will “die with him; they will live with him and not fear danger.”¹³⁰ Sunzi maintains this reverence by keeping his focus on his goal, the survival of the state, rather than on his own reputation: “[A general] who does not advance to seek fame, nor [fail to retreat] to avoid [being charged with the capital] offense of retreating, but seeks only to preserve the people and gain advantage for the ruler is the state’s treasure.”¹³¹ This ideal leader achieves the balance he seeks, and with this in mind, one can be—and can expect his followers to be—wise, credible, courageous, and strict because “[w]hen the general regards his troops as young children, they will advance into the deepest valleys with him. When he regards the troops as his beloved children, they will be willing to die with him.”¹³²

This is not to say that he expects to cater to these children; rather he is the firm, strict, and

¹²⁸ Sun-tzu, Sawyer and Sawyer, p. 210.

¹²⁹ Graham, p. 111. Appropriate is the fact that, according to A. C. Graham, this (Legalist Han Fei’s) definition is the fullest definition of the word because, in reality, Liu Bei was most likely “Confucian in appearance but Legalist in substance.”

¹³⁰ Sun-tzu, Sawyer and Sawyer, p. 167.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 215.

loving parent who expects them to live up to his high expectations of them. To influence them, the balance of the *Dao* is necessary to win the hearts of his followers and to achieve the benefits of benevolence within his alliances, his simulated family, in order to achieve victory through what Sunzi calls the *Dao* of administration.¹³³

Benevolence

Luo Guanzhong's *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* contrasts Liu Bei's humane benevolence with Cao Cao's lack of it. As with *The Art of War*, the episodes do revolve around winning and losing, and Sunzi's presence and benevolence—like a defining ideogram—pervade the epic. Liu Bei is the embodiment of Sunzi's factor of benevolence and his focus on winning the enemy over to his side rather than seeking its annihilation.¹³⁴

One example of the avoidance of bloodshed is found when Liu Bei's most favored advisor, Zhuge Liang, desperate for weapons going into a battle, follows his leader's methodology. Instead of initiating a bloody skirmish, he gains the necessary arrows by tricking Cao Cao's men through subterfuge. While Liu Bei's men sound their battle drums and run on their side of the river bank in a fog, they control a boat that holds a dummy at which Cao Cao's men shoot their arrows through the fog bank. Of course, Liu Bei's men gather up these weapons. Later, Lu Su asks him how he knew there would be fog, and Zhuge Liang responds as his superior would have—that it is a benevolent leader's responsibility to know about the terrain in order to strategically avoid direct combat and the unnecessary deaths of his followers (Chapter 30). According to Sunzi:

¹³³ Ibid., pp. 221-222. "Unify their courage to be as one through the Tao of Administration. Realize the appropriate employment of the hard and soft through the patterns of terrain."

¹³⁴ Moss Roberts, "Afterword" in Luo Guangzong's *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel*, trans. Moss Roberts (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 942. Many Twenty- and Twenty-first century sinologists agree that, despite the outcome of the plot, the work promotes Liu Bei's Confucian ideals.

A military commander is a mediocrity, unless he is versed in the patterns of the heavens, recognizes the advantages of the terrain, knows the interaction of prognostic signs, understands the changes in weather, examines the map of deployment, and is clear about the balance of forces.¹³⁵

Moreover, as does Sunzi, Liu Bei relies on strategic leadership that “reflects the ‘institutional perspective of a community of alliances, rather than a simple subordinate and management relationship.”¹³⁶ They both create a simulated familial relationship (as described earlier). Both Sunzi and Liu Bei highly honor this filial connection and win the people’s support because of their ethical actions. This connection to their followers relates directly to their high priority for *wu wei*, the attainment of non-attainment—rejecting activity that is contrary to nature rather than through status or authority, and thus their high regard for strategies that avoid bloodshed.¹³⁷

It is not only winning or losing but also Liu Bei’s benevolence that is central to Luo’s historical fiction. Luo illustrates this concept at the onset of the epic in Liu Bei’s battling the Yellow Scarves in his desire to maintain the status quo of the state in order to retain good fortune for its people.¹³⁸ Liu Bei’s actions reveal him to be in a cycle that eventually lifts him to great political height. He appears to have the Mandate of Heaven through his benevolent capacities, and his intent of holding his (eventual) kingdom in place is not related to political promotion but to a sacred trust to save the state and serve the people.

Therefore, the Peach Garden pact (which begins *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and the brotherhood that the story revolves around) is sealed with a ritual and oath, aligning the

¹³⁵ Luo, pp. 233–237.

¹³⁶ Sun-tzu, p. 153.

¹³⁷ Later, we will see that Liu Bei temporarily loses this priority and thus loses the kingdom.

¹³⁸ Luo, p. 12. Liu Bei is capable of “dominating the age” as Qiao Xuan says of any person who could save the empire.

brothers in arms in a holy, cosmic compact.¹³⁹ This compact represents a “deliberate tradition” of ethical and religious precepts that create a “socio-political cohesion for a society that ha[s] grown complex.”¹⁴⁰ Liu Bei’s charge as a leader is to protect this tradition and to be the representation of the cosmic connection between his followers and nature and Heaven.

In order to live up to this requirement, the leader has to be pure and righteous and be, as Sunzi says, a benevolent “example to the common people. They, in turn, [will imitate his] virtues by their own initiative and not by governmental force. Then there would be harmony among men. . . .”¹⁴¹ The benevolence found in the following example from Chapter 41 illustrates conduct to be imitated:

A scout reported: “Cao Cao’s main force is camped at Fan. They’re gathering boats and rafts to cross over here today.” “We can defend ourselves from Jiangling,” the commanders assured [Liu Bei], “but with such a multitude on our hands we’re barely covering ten *li* a day. Who knows when we will make Jiangling? . . . Wouldn’t it be expedient to leave the people behind for now and go on ahead ourselves?” [Liu Bei] replied with deep feeling, “The human factor is the key to any undertaking. How can we abandon those who have committed themselves to us?”¹⁴²

His humane connection to his men shows him to be benevolently caring for their welfare, rather than merely calculating plans to use them. And without understanding what is common to human beings, one cannot lead *or* defeat them. As mentioned before, Liu Bei is living in a time of great upheaval, and this leader struggles against defeat and to maintain power. He must serve with righteousness, which forces him to deal with the human factor—unlike Cao Cao who appears to calculate and win by making decisions with a strategically precise, fine edge of a sword.

For instance in Chapter 84, Liu Bei hesitates to take advantage of a weaker statesman

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁴⁰ Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), pp. 156–157.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

¹⁴² Luo, p. 315.

when advisor Pang Tong urges Liu Bei to kill Lu Bu to gain his Shu territory. But Liu Bei refuses, not once but—twice, saving Lu Bu’s life. Liu Bei refuses to act with less than the highest degree of humanity and benevolence in this situation, saying: “I will not establish myself by such means. . . Lu Bu and I are of the same house and I would shudder at harming him.”¹⁴³ And when his own followers attempt to assassinate Lu Bu, Liu Bei stands by his principles warning, “Let each throw down his sword blade or die” (Chapter 60).¹⁴⁴ (Most likely, this rejection of his advice alienates Pang Tong (in the fictional account) who eventually follows Cao Cao who is more appreciative than Liu Bei of his intuitive judgment about dealing with the enemy.)

Time and time again, such actions reveal Liu Bei’s inherent goodness as he proves himself a great leader, putting the welfare of the people over his own. According to Antonio Carmone: “[A]ctions that are taken by Liu Bei . . . are almost always performed from standpoints of virtue which are reflective of Liu Bei’s own benevolence.”¹⁴⁵ For instance, when his people are in danger of being overtaken by Cao Cao’s army, Liu Bei leads them away from the attack. He, by himself, could have gotten away after a portent (a swirling dust cloud that darkens the sun momentarily) warns that he must flee—according to one of his men: “Abandon these people with all speed and be gone” was the advice. True to his character, Liu Bei’s responds: “They have followed from as far as Xinye . . . I cannot abandon them.”¹⁴⁶ He has the courage of his convictions for “[r]ighteousness is the accordance of actions with what is right. . . .”¹⁴⁷ Instead of

¹⁴³ Lo Kuan-Chung. *Romance of the Three Kingdoms: San Kuo Chih Yen-I*, trans. C. H. Brewitt-Taylor (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1958), 1: p. 637.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 637.

¹⁴⁵ Carmone, p. 255.

¹⁴⁶ Luo, p. 316

¹⁴⁷ Confucius, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, XX.20, in James Legge’s *The Chinese Classics: The Shoo King* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 405–406.

escaping, he takes direct action—leading 2000 of his men to meet his opponents in order allow the rest of his people time to move to safety” (Chapter 41).¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, his benevolence does not save them because the majority falls into Cao Cao’s hands.

And although his strategy is not always successful, it is his benevolence, as with Sunzi’s, that draws those who are virtuous and hold to tradition to serve him militarily, like Zhao Yun, Ma Chao and Chan Wei¹⁴⁹ or like his Peach Garden brothers Zhang Fei and Guan Yu who pledge to dedicate themselves to serving the people and the state in Chapter 1.¹⁵⁰ These men honor and recognize all that Liu Bei stands for. For example, Zhao Yun had served Yuan Shao but found that he was careless about the welfare of the people and disloyal to his prince. Liu Bei’s sense of humanity and leadership—benevolence—brings this officer into his ranks. Even though Liu Bei’s forces are weak at the time, Chao Yun prefers to serve a man who is sincere and righteous. Similarly in Chapter 8, Zhuge Liang is moved by Liu Bei and chooses to follow this leader.

Zhuge Liang] replied, “I have long been happy on my farm and am fond of my leisure. I fear I cannot obey your command. [Liu Bei] wept. “If you will not, O Master, what will become of the people?” The tears rolled down unchecked upon the lapel and sleeves of his robe. This proved to [Zhuge Liang] the sincerity of his desire and he said, “General, if you will accept me, I will render what trifling service I can.”¹⁵¹

Despite these examples that prove his obviously benevolent wish for the welfare of his people; despite Liu Bei’s development of the Kingdom of Shu, and despite his drawing good leaders to follow him, he does not attain balance—Sunzi’s *Dao* of administration. Liu Bei fails in the end.

¹⁴⁸ Luo, p. 317.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁵¹ Lo, 1: p. 401.

Non Benevolence

Though not among those sworn in the sacred pact to uphold the Mandate of Heaven and the state in the Peach Garden pact, Cao Cao also claims that his war against his rivals for power is to “rescue the state.” He attempts to give the impression that he is operating under the laws of propriety in order to win followers because he needs to simulate a sacred purpose (like the pact in the Peach Garden) in order to convince the people of his mandate to rule. In reality, Cao Cao does not seek the mandate but seeks the power to create it, and benevolence is not a key factor to his success.

He is successful because people recognize his power to lead. Similar to Sunzi and Liu Bei who form their community of alliances to maintain relationships with their followers, Cao Cao forms a bond with his people. However, his connection is not a spiritual one based on traditional precepts. Instead, he establishes military agricultural colonies—giving peasants (who had suffered from the destruction of their territories) land that had been abandoned in the war. The land is controlled by Cao Cao’s government, and for the first time in their memories, the peasants are not under the power of their former landlords. These grateful subjects grow supplies and defend their plots.¹⁵² His is not the model spiritual connection to the cosmos as Liu Bei’s is, but instead, Cao Cao models Sunzi’s practical call for provisions to be on hand locally, rather than transporting them to the battle field, to gain advantage for victory.¹⁵³

Cultivating advantage is Cao Cao’s *forte*. He is not from the royal line—his father being the adopted son of a eunuch at court. And as his father had, Cao Cao gains promotion into the middle ranks—until the civil war. At this juncture in Chapter 10, Cao Cao thrives during the

¹⁵² Rafe De Crespigny, *Man from the Margin: Cao Cao and the Three Kingdoms*. The Fifty-first George Ernest Morrison Lecture in Ethnology. Australian National University, Canberra. 9 November 1990. p. 19.

¹⁵³ Sun-tzu, p. 173.

destruction of established authority. He “[picks] the finest of the [defeated] Yellow Scarves troops and [organizes] them into the Qingzhou army. . . . In consequence, Cao Cao’s prestige [rises] steadily. . . .”¹⁵⁴ But regardless of his manipulations to prove otherwise, he is typically remembered as being less virtuous or esteemed than Liu Bei. According to Rafe De Crespigny, this attitude seems to derive from Cao Cao’s inability to destroy his chief rivals, and, even though he “restored government in the heart land of China,” the state he founded was later destroyed.¹⁵⁵ Luo Guanzhong himself chooses to reiterate this sense of failure by quoting “a poet of later time” who reveals the common, negative attitude toward Cao Cao’s reputation: “Cao Cao in all his vaunted cunning, / Slew his hosts and kept on running. . . .” (Chapter 11).¹⁵⁶

Moreover, Luo’s readers see that Cao Cao’s rituals attempt to hide his ambitions and that his long-winded speeches are full of insincerity. He does anything to win, and in comparison with Liu Bei, his lack of focus on the quality of benevolence seems to prove him to be the lesser man. Yet, he, too, partially embodies Sunzi’s ideal leader:

Because Cao Cao comes from the lower gentry, he must have charismatic identity to maintain his control, and such an identity is achieved with his capacity to attract and hold men in service and support in battle. Cao Cao is a flamboyant, arrogant, luxurious, quick-witted, and frequently brutal personality.¹⁵⁷

Regardless of the tactics he uses to get to the top and to stay there, this non-benevolent leader knows his followers’ expectations and pretends to be pure in intention in order to become or remain their leader and to be their connection to heaven—the Son of Heaven. Cao Cao knows that what Confucius says is true: “If the people have no faith in their rulers, there is no standing

¹⁵⁴ Luo, p. 79.

¹⁵⁵ De Crespigny, p. 20.

¹⁵⁶ Luo, p. 81.

¹⁵⁷ De Crespigny, p. 26.

for the State.”¹⁵⁸

He creates this faith in his own fashion. From training farmers who have never had military training to promoting those who had experience in the old imperial army, Cao Cao successfully uses Sunzi’s reward system: “. . . what motivates men to slay the enemy is anger; what stimulates them to seize profits from the enemy is material goods. . . . Treat the captured soldiers well in order to nurture them [for our use].”¹⁵⁹ The significance of this tactic is that it has no connection with the factor of benevolence, and yet, for Cao Cao, the tactic brings him ever closer to the possession of power, his proof of the mandate.

An example of Cao Cao’s lack of benevolence can be found when Mi Heng’s strips naked in Cao Cao’s presence. Mi Heng declares Cao Cao’s corrupt nature—his inability to chant the odes (See Chapter IV.) or to recognize the difference between “the able and the corrupt, [his habit of holding] men in . . . contempt and [his ability to believe] that he can become the leader of the lords of the realm.”¹⁶⁰ His criticisms seem to come from Cao Cao’s lack of reverence for tradition. Ironically, Cao Cao actually recruited poets—“Masters of the Jianan Period” who “[restore] the voices of individuals” whose past had collapsed due to the war.¹⁶¹ Their focus on the individual reflects Cao Cao’s own individual talent that allows him to rise to the heights that he does. It is not morality but ability that leads Cao Cao to victory.

Another example of Cao Cao’s lack of benevolence can be found even in his personal relationships. He does not share the same sense of connection that Liu Bei does with those he is close to. When Cao Cao sends one of his own sons, Cao Zhang, into battle in Chapter 16, he tells

¹⁵⁸ Confucius, *Analects*. XII, 7, in James Legge’s *The Chinese Classics: The Shoo King* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 254.

¹⁵⁹ Sun-tzu, p. 174.

¹⁶⁰ Luo, p.182.

¹⁶¹ De Crespigny, p. 31.

him, “At home we are father and son, but when a task is given you have to consider your duty as a servant of your ruler. The law knows no kindness, and you must beware.”¹⁶² Cao Cao is relentless in achieving victory and in his determination is to remain alive to achieve it. This attitude enables him to win regardless of the cost and to rule with impunity. Power is his driving force. In Cao Cao, one finds Sunzi’s call for strict rules for the troops and fair rewards and punishments, aligned with his ideal leadership qualities mentioned earlier: wisdom, credibility, courage, and strictness—minus benevolence. And there is no sense that Cao Cao thinks upon his followers as parents would their children, as Sunzi and Liu Bei do. And yet he is victorious, while Liu Bei fails, because his use of force and fear appeal to men of the Han in a way that morality cannot.¹⁶³

Emotion versus Victory

The contrast between the legitimately benevolent—all actions purposefully working for the good of the people—and the passionate, self-serving actions of Cao Cao is crucial to understanding why Liu Bei never attains the Mandate of Heaven. Liu Bei’s insistence on responding with benevolence regardless of the situation is not always appropriate for the leader (great as opposed to small appropriateness as discussed in Chapter I), and when he *does* react with passion, he ends up irrationally and foolishly seeking revenge against Sun Quan for the death in battle of Guan Yu, his Peach Garden brother.¹⁶⁴ (See further discussion in Chapter IV.) Luo portrays Liu Bei as completely bypassing Sunzi’s admonition for restraint: “Whoever awaits his enemy is at ease and whoever has to rush into conflict will be fatigued.”¹⁶⁵ Liu Bei’s reaction

¹⁶² Lo, 2: p. 130.

¹⁶³ Arthur Waley, *The Way and its Power: A Study of the Tao Te Ching and its Place in Chinese Thought* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 69.

¹⁶⁴ Luo, p. 590.

¹⁶⁵ Sun-tzu, p. 191.

reveals him to be in one of five categories to avoid, according to *The Art of War*: “The general, unable to control his irritation, will launch his men to the assault like swarming ants, with the result that one-third of his men are slain, while the town still remains untaken. . . .”¹⁶⁶

Until this episode, Liu Bei has maintained a defensive focus rather than seeking to annihilate his enemies as Cao Cao often strategically does, and he has encouraged the support of the people through his humanistic purposes and moral influence. But regardless of his benevolence, in the end, Liu Bei is an example of a leader who cannot achieve the *Dao* of administration because he is rigid in his outlook and does not readily adapt to the situation at hand.

Both extremes, benevolence and its complete opposite, are prey to emotion. However, Cao Cao never alters his agenda due to his own passion and actually uses the passions of others against them, a strategy that Sunzi suggests in *The Art of War*, so his success is not a surprise. His non benevolent actions help him win his cause. On the other hand, even when Liu Bei does not react in anger, his benevolent attitude fails him over time. He cannot adapt to circumstance as Cao Cao does throughout the story. In the end, Liu Bei finally has to understand what Cao Cao knows and what Pang Tong had once told him when discussing the tactics necessary to secure the state:

My lord’s words are quite in accord with abstract rectitude, but such ideas scarcely suit the days of rebellion. There are other ways of fighting than with warlike weapons, but to adhere too obstinate to the idea of abstract rectitude is to do nothing. . . . Remember if you do not take it now another will.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Lionel Giles, 1910. (n.d.). <http://www.chinapage.com/sunzi-e.html>.

¹⁶⁷ Lo, 1: p. 634.

Benevolence (and its associated reverence for the human factor) is a significant characteristic of Sunzi's successful leader, but it is only part of a whole person whose purpose is to save the state. Regardless of the circumstances, this one characteristic is the main thrust of Liu Bei's leadership and proves to be an inadequate one in time of war during Han. And although Cao Cao lacks benevolence, he appears to be closer to achieving the *Dao* of administration, at least during times of state emergency. Luo Guanzhong's opposing characterizations of Liu Bei and Cao Cao in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* reflect Sunzi's ideal leader found in *The Art of War* to be one who understands that "[w]arfare is the greatest affair of the state, the basis of life and death, the Way (*Tao*) to survival or extinction."¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ Sun-tzu, Sawyer and Sawyer, p. 167.

Chapter IV
The Mandate of Heaven

In *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, leaders know the value of having the Mandate of Heaven or at least the appearance of having it to win the hearts of their followers. Those who believe in the moral agency of the Mandate of Heaven (*Tian ming*) look for one person to be chosen by Heaven to represent its cosmic order because his virtue legitimates the Mandate.¹⁶⁹ Throughout the novel, Liu Bei appears to be the benevolent leader, and thus the person who shall receive the Mandate. Conversely, Cao Cao tries to exhibit the Mandate of Heaven, when, in actuality, his goal is the mandate of power. Yet, neither is likely to be an ideal leader according to Sunzi's *The Art of War* because, in fact, both focus on their own personal advantage, unlike Sunzi's role model who serves the state and does not depend on the Mandate of Heaven to rule.¹⁷⁰

Tian ming

After the overthrow of the Shang Dynasty (around 1040 B.C.E.), the Zhou Dynasty came to power, at which time the ultimate cosmic authority came to be known as *Tian*,¹⁷¹ translated as "heaven." Beginning with the Zhou, it claimed that only those who receive the Mandate of Heaven could rule China, and those with the Mandate are called the Sons of Heaven (*Tian zi*).¹⁷²

With the collapse of the Western Zhou, independent states emerged and competed with each other, and it became impossible for any of their multiple leaders to claim *the* Mandate. Regardless of its return to one universal leader, the establishment of the Qin Dynasty (221 B.C.E.) did not reinstate the worship of *Tian ming*, Mandate of Heaven—causing Confucians to

¹⁶⁹ Graham, p. 115.

¹⁷⁰ Sun-tzu, Sawyer and Sawyer, p. 223.

¹⁷¹ Graham, pp. 1–3.

¹⁷² Michael Loewe, "*Tian ming* (Mandate of Heaven)," *RoutledgeCurzon Encyclopedia of Confucianism*, ed. Yao Xinzong (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 609.

yearn for the days of the benevolent rule of Zhou emperors.¹⁷³ But even traditionally the Mandate could be lost by the misconduct of a ruler, as Michael Loewe remarks:

This principal was applied anachronistically to legitimize the means whereby the Shang house had displaced that of the Xia, and the kings of the Zhou those of the Shang; for Jie and Zhou, the last rulers of Xia and Shang, had shown themselves to be oppressive tyrants who had flouted Heaven's will [*sic*].¹⁷⁴

When the Han emperors turned to this principal for the justification of exercising their sovereignty, it became the foundation of Han authority when “[t]he deliberate manipulation of tradition for political ends [was] practiced.”¹⁷⁵ For the elites, at least, Heaven worship, the official religion of the Han, was little more than “sovereignty–validating ceremonies,” which had little to do with actual spiritual belief or engagement.¹⁷⁶

Nevertheless, the commoners believed in and benefitted from this imperial ritual. With the promise of order inherently tied to Heaven's Mandate, the state religion, although contrived during Han, created a sense of security and survival during catastrophic natural events.¹⁷⁷ A variety of factions arose in relation to the adaptations to the “Mandate of Heaven.” For instance, the shift was profound from the traditional Confucian ideal of the leader being the embodiment of Heaven to Mencius's later alternative Confucian stance that one can actually know who has been appointed by heaven because “Heaven looks through the eyes of our people.”¹⁷⁸ For the Han, the people's opinion *was* the mandate, and in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, we see

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 610.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 609.

¹⁷⁵ Bennet Bronson, “Order, Legitimacy, and Wealth in Ancient China,” *Order, Legitimacy, and Wealth in Ancient States*, edited Janet E. Richards and Mary Van Buren (New York: Cambridge, 2000), pp. 122, 127.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 125.

¹⁷⁷ Sheng Jiang, “Early Religious Taoism and the Re-understanding of History of the Han through the Three Kingdoms,” *Social Sciences in China* 23, no.2 (2002): p. 78.

¹⁷⁸ Graham, p. 115.

these conflicting views play out.

Sunzi

With Sunzi, philosophy broke from the traditional concepts of leadership and the necessity of receiving the Mandate. No great state, according to Sunzi, can depend on the Mandate of Heaven to maintain security.¹⁷⁹ Instead, this alleged pretense of Heaven can be undermined by those, like Cao Cao, who have the capacity to attack either a complaisant or spiritually confident army. Sunzi says that what others believe to be unassailable can be defeated if a leader has faith in himself rather than in the Mandate.—“Have faith in *yourself* [my emphasis], apply your awesomeness to the enemy. Then his cities can be taken, his state can be subjugated.”¹⁸⁰ And yet Sunzi’s statement is not a call for self-aggrandizement: he defines warfare as the promotion of the state for the sake of the people. As he says, “[an ideal general] does not advance to seek fame, nor [fail to retreat] to avoid [being charged with the capital] offense of retreating, but seeks only to preserve the people and gain advantage.”¹⁸¹

Such a leader will have the confidence to seek information rather than await Heaven’s portents to gain advantage. Advanced knowledge, an awareness that stems from careful, studious evaluation, is what produces victory: this competence “cannot be gained from ghosts and spirits, inferred from phenomena, or projected from the measures of Heaven, but must be gained from

¹⁷⁹ Sun-tzu, p. 223.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 215. Interesting to note is that Sunzi became legendary as one who does not lead for personal glory as evidenced in the Ming Dynasty work *Tung-chou lieh-kuo-chih*, in which he is depicted as “having simply vanished of his own volition, saying ‘[W]hen accomplishments are complete, failing to retire will invariably result in later misfortune. I am not trying to preserve myself alone, but I . . . want to preserve you.’” (See Ralph D. Sawyer and Mei-chün Sawyer, “Introduction,” Sun-tzu’s *The Art of War*, trans. Ralph D. Sawyer and Mei-chün Sawyer (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 83–84.)

men for they have the knowledge of the enemy's true situation."¹⁸²

Thus this sense of awareness is created in one who makes it his responsibility to know men well, not their interaction with the cosmos but their interactions with one another. This knowledge of others enables the great leader to “forge . . . preparatory alliances.”¹⁸³ This rational capacity to know others is indicative of a key component for a successful leader. Knowing himself through the flaws and virtues he recognizes in others will serve him well. Such a leader has the advantage of understanding the very people he would lead: “[I]f you know them and know yourself, your victory will not be imperiled,” he says.¹⁸⁴

Yet this quality cannot be reciprocal because the great leader “stupefies the eyes and ears of the officers and troops, keeping them ignorant.”¹⁸⁵ To retain his leadership advantage, the people should not know his mind.¹⁸⁶ A thinking individual who knows his enemy and his subjects is celebrated by Sunzi as someone who enables the group to survive. Great leaders must be aware of the nuances of humanity—personalities, habits, and so forth—as well as the potentialities or possible changes in the situations humans may find themselves in. The leader is a student of human experience and for this reason is creative and adaptable rather than a rigid follower of portents of Heaven: “The army does not maintain any constant strategic configuration of power (*shih*), water has no constant shape (*hsing*). One who is able to change and transform in accord with the enemy and wrest victory is termed spiritual.”¹⁸⁷

To call forth this diversity of creativity is to create a “spiritual methodology.” The five very different types of intellect found in successful spies embody this diversity of creativity:

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 231.

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 222–3.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 215.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 222.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 167.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 193.

those who are savvy about local information, those who understand the internal affairs of an enemy, those who are attempting to gather your own strategies, those who can spread false information, and those who are able to survive in order to report. Sunzi says that “They are a ruler’s treasures.”¹⁸⁸ This is true because their rational analysis attains “the true pinnacle of excellence” which helps to suppress an enemy without battle.¹⁸⁹ Again, he stresses the significance of an individual’s self-knowledge, as opposed to knowledge of the cosmos, as bringing power into the leader’s hands in order to achieve victory: “Thus enlightened rulers and sagacious generals who are able to get intelligent spies will invariably attain great achievements. This is the essence of the military, what the Three Armies rely on to move.”¹⁹⁰ To Sunzi, the significant component of a leader is the will to survive. In order to do so, he must use his own intellect and the intellect of others. This self-dependence eliminates the need for the Mandate of Heaven. Yet, for Sunzi, autonomy does not promote individual glory; instead, it serves to preserve the state because “a vanquished state cannot be revived, the dead cannot be brought back to life.”¹⁹¹

The Romance of the Three Kingdoms

The novel begins with an allusion to its basic cycle of Chinese history: “The empire long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been.”¹⁹² The regeneration elicited from these changes stems from an accountability that new leadership invariably promises. While the previous chapter addresses the necessity for a leader to be benevolent in order to gain the Mandate of Heaven, the complication of the story arises in regard to who actually claims the

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 231.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 177.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 233.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 177.

¹⁹² Luo, p. 5.

Mandate and reunifies China, with at least two distinct personalities and ideologies in the story competing and contrasting. The independent, self-made, aggressive, and flamboyant opportunist Cao Cao contrasts with Liu Bei, an ethical leader who abides by traditional Confucian precepts and rules of society.

The Son of Heaven—the person who receives the Mandate and begins a new dynasty or inherits the rule—is chosen ostensibly by Heaven, but only those who are benevolent and righteous and have filial piety and discernment could receive the Mandate.¹⁹³ Of the two characters, Liu Bei is portrayed as an exemplary, benevolent Confucian ruler to whom the Mandate shall be given. On the opposite hand, Cao Cao strives to show that he actually obtains the Mandate of Heaven, when, in fact, he desires political hegemony. Yet, neither is an ideal leader according to Sunzi's *The Art of War* because both strive for personal advantage in the end.

Liu Bei and The Mandate

Originally, Liu Bei does not seek to rule but to protect the status quo—the Mandate held by the Han rule—from the rebellious. Readers find no thoughts of glory for himself in the novel, and he aligns with others of the same motivation: “We three—Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei—though of different families, swear brotherhood, and promise mutual help to one end. . . . We swear to serve the state and save the people. . . .” (Chapter 1).¹⁹⁴ Beyond this pivotal episode, in individual cases, Liu Bei continues to act in an ethical manner for the preservation of the Han rule.

For instance, when Cao Cao wishes to keep Liu Bei and Lu Bu from aligning against him, he attempts “the two tigers trick,” convincing the Emperor to instruct Liu Bei to kill Lu Bu

¹⁹³ See “Confucianism” in Chapter I.

¹⁹⁴ Luo, p. 9.

(Chapter 14).¹⁹⁵ Cao Cao had reasoned that his ally Lu Bu most certainly could be considered a threat to Liu Bei. Suspecting Cao Cao's motivation, Liu Bei is respectful to and protective of Lu Bu, rejecting Zhang Fei's (his Peace Garden brother's) warning and admonition to protect himself by obeying the orders to kill Lu Bu. But instead of acting in self preservation, he reacts with virtue and benevolence. This reaction had been forged in the original pact made in the Peach Garden to uphold the Mandate of the Han: "If we turn away from righteousness or forget kindness, may Heaven and Human smite us!"¹⁹⁶

Moreover, Liu Bei acknowledges that the man is deserving of respect, coming to him in desperation from a previous battle (Chapter 14).¹⁹⁷ Liu Bei solidifies friendship between the two and thwarts Cao Cao's plans to use Lu Bu to capture him. As a result of virtuous benevolence, it is Lu Bu who protects Liu Bei's family (and thus the Han lineage and Mandate) during the siege of Xuzhou (Chapter 15).¹⁹⁸

Not only is Liu Bei a benevolent person who has the courage to risk his life, he is a righteous person who defends the Mandate of the Han. In Chapter 31, when Cao Cao invites Liu Bei to witness his power and domination of the court, he presumes that Liu Bei should honor him, but instead, Liu Bei is repulsed by Cao Cao's attempt to usurp the Emperor's position. Cao Cao asks him, "As my honored guest, you once received much kindness. Will you dishonor our friendship now?" Liu Bei responds by pulling an imperial decree from his girdle (the "girdle mandate"), reading "loud and clear" to Cao Cao's chagrin: "You claim to be prime minister to the Han. In fact you are a traitor to the Han, whom I, a kinsman of the Han, am authorized by

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 111.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 113, 115, 116.

imperial decree to punish.”^{199*}

The morality revealed by this story serves to link Liu Bei to what appears to be a legitimate connection to the Mandate while it enhances Cao Cao’s determination to capture and destroy him. After a much heated battle in which Liu Bei is almost captured numerous times, he asks his followers to find a better leader for themselves: “I urge you to seek out another more enlightened lord in whose service you may distinguish yourselves.”²⁰⁰ This comment prompts Lord Guan Yu (one of the three members of the Peach Garden pact) to encourage him with the history of the Mandate:

At the beginning of the Han when the founding emperor suffered so many reverses in his struggle for mastery . . . his success in a single battle at Nine Mile Mountain enabled him to establish a four-hundred-year patrimony. Reverses are common in war and must not be allowed to affect morale.²⁰¹

At this moment, the leader of Wu Kingdom in the south, Sun Quan, reminds Liu Bei that his Han kinsman, Liu Biao, will welcome a timely alliance to break Cao Cao’s growing power.²⁰² Liu Biao’s immediate acknowledgment of his Han kinship with Liu Bei, despite warnings from his own trusted advisor, and Liu Bei’s acceptance of Liu Biao’s assistance are both links to the Mandate. These actions prepare the reader for Liu Bei’s eventual declaration as to *why* he will accept the Mandate (in order to protect the imperial house), even though he seems completely against doing so, throughout the novel.

Even in an emergency situation, Liu Bei is still reluctant to accept himself as Emperor.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 241. *A Taylor-Brewitt edition reads, “Under the name of the Prime Minister you are really a rebel. I am a direct descendant of the family” in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C.H. Brewitt-Taylor (1959; reprint Singapore: Tuttle Publishing Company, 1959, 2002. Kindle Edition. March 13, 2008), Chapter 31, paragraph 20.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 243.

²⁰¹ Ibid., p. 243.

²⁰² Ibid., p. 243.

No amount of reasoning by his beloved advisor Zhuge Liang will convince him that he does indeed have the Mandate to rule after Han Emperor Liu Xian is executed by Cao Cao's son, Cao Pi: "Shall I emulate the conduct of renegade traitors?" he asks (Chapter 80).²⁰³ Only by pretending to be ill and appealing to his emotion does Zhuge Liang wring from Liu Bei a commitment to ascend the throne. When a concerned Liu Bei asks him what is causing his illness, Zhuge Liang is coy and illusive, until he believes Liu Bei is desperate enough about his health to acquiesce to his wishes. Zhuge Liang "revives" in order to say:

Good fortune has placed the whole of the Riverland in Your Majesty's hands, exactly as I predicted long ago. Now that Cao Pi [Cao Cao's son] has usurped the throne . . . all our officers and officials . . . earnestly desire to serve Your Majesty as emperor and to share in the glory of eliminating the Cao clan and reviving the Liu. Your refusal was unthinkable.²⁰⁴

He continues, predicting that the court will soon disperse because Liu Bei refuses to lead. Of course, Liu Bei responds that his refusal was not a pretext but a sincere sense of unworthiness for the Mandate of Heaven to fall to him: "I fear the adverse judgment of the world," he states, to which Zhuge Liang manipulates his emotions by responding: "What Heaven grants is refused only at peril."²⁰⁵ When Liu Bei finally agrees, he finds that he has been duped into agreement because witnesses are hidden behind screens in order to expedite the process of making him emperor (Chapter 80).²⁰⁶

Although he is of the Liu imperial family and has the backing of "the common people and the chieftains," he is reluctant to assume the throne, questioning their choice and the judgment of his subjects. When he is ascending the throne, as he accepts the role: He "tremble[s]

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 609.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 609.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 609.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 609–610.

before that clear mandate.”²⁰⁷ He remains suspicious of taking the throne, and after he is emperor, he launches an attack and is defeated, convincing himself that he does not have the Mandate. His first imperial act—to attack Wu leader, Sun Quan, in the south rather than Wei leader Cao Pi in the west—destroys the newly established Han rule. He had never believed his “clear” mandate, but his highly vulnerable emotions allowed Zhuge Liang to convince him otherwise. And even though his people loved him, no one could change his situation. His reluctance in accepting the Mandate combined with his failure on the battlefield is telling. Moreover, when he performs his responsibilities as emperor of the Han, such as the sacrifices for the murdered Han Emperor Xian, he is sickened to the point of being incapable of administrative duties,²⁰⁸ thus revealing the chasm between the man and the natural connections that should manifest his appointment by Nature and Heaven. (See Chapter II.) Liu Bei’s motivation to protect the Han and reluctance to accept the Mandate greatly contrasts with Cao Cao’s ambition to take the throne in order to establish his own dynasty.

Cao Cao and The Mandate

Cao Cao, conversely, does sincerely seek power, although to gain it, he first works for and through the Han Dynasty’s levels of advancement. Unlike Liu Bei, he is an expert at placing others at disadvantage or using them to gain advantage, as in the episode mentioned above when Cao Cao attempts to manipulate Lu Bu to kill Liu Bei. Unlike Liu Bei, who is obviously loved by the people and manifests the characteristics of the ideal Son of Heaven, Cao Cao contrives to pronounce his “mandate.” For instance during a royal hunt (Chapter 20), when all participants notice the golden arrow belonging to Emperor Xian (whom Cao Cao soon will turn into his puppet) has felled a distant deer, Cao Cao does not hesitate to ride forward to claim the arrow

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 610.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 608.

and the kill, enraging all around at his impertinence for lying so that it would appear that he has the Mandate and for not allowing the Emperor to take the credit for his own marksmanship. Cao Cao is non-penitent, whatsoever, ambiguously taunting all that his “own” marksmanship is “only the good fortune of the Son of Heaven.”²⁰⁹ This is a man who takes what he wants and a man who believes himself worthy to do so, even though he was not born into the aristocracy or Han lineage. Cao Cao uses his self-worth and knowledge of himself to be observant of the worth of others. His ability to take advantage of this capacity is almost a parody of Sunzi’s directive to be aware of one’s own flaws in order to learn those of others.²¹⁰

Another example of his skill in taking advantage of situations to gain power is found when the “the dynasty [is] never at lower ebb” and the Han capital, Luoyang, is ruined due to the battle between Dong Zhuo (a powerful Han general who had set Emperor Xian on the throne)²¹¹ and Sun Jian (king of Wu) (Chapters 11 and 12).²¹² As a result of his vulnerable state, the Emperor sends for Cao Cao for protection (Chapter 13).²¹³ Cao Cao accepts advice from the Emperor’s advisors that he should move the court to Xuchang for safety (Chapter 14).²¹⁴ Court astrologer, Wang Li, reads the stars and tells Liu Ai, the Director of the Imperial Clan, of his findings, who then relates the information to the Emperor of the Han: “The Mandate of Heaven does not permanently empower any dynasty, nor does any one of the five agents—water, fire, earth, wood, metal—remain ascendant forever. Fire, symbol of the Han, will be replaced by earth, symbol of the Wei” (Chapter 14).²¹⁵ The knowledge of this secret petition affords Cao Cao

²⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 158.

²¹⁰ Sunzi, p. 215.

²¹¹ Luo, p. 87.

²¹² Ibid., p. 93.

²¹³ Ibid., p. 98.

²¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 108–109.

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 109.

the methodology by which he completes his agenda to manipulate the Emperor to gain the Mandate.

Of the Five Phases (*wuxing*)—the agents²¹⁶—each dynasty is associated with one in particular that will rise and fall in power. (See discussion in Chapter I.) The element associated with Cao Cao is earth, according to his advisors. The qualities of stubbornness and self-centeredness are inherent with earth and cannot undermine the readily expansive nature of fire, the element associated with the Han and the virtue of justice. The advisors' assessment is true as long as he focuses his strength and attacks in southwest China (Han). However, if he can bring the conflict to Wei, he will be victorious because earth is the virtue in control there. "The virtue of Han was fire; and your element is earth," opportunistic Han advisor Xun Wenruo tells Cao Cao, "and so your fortune depends on your getting there. Fire can overcome earth as earth can multiply wood. [The Emperor's advisors] agree and you have only to bide your time."²¹⁷

Thus is exemplified Cao Cao's capacity for seeking and gaining advantage for his own advancement, rather than for the good of the kingdom. Unlike any of the sages or worthy individuals who honestly believe that Heaven intends for them to claim the Mandate of Heaven, the irony—and perhaps *the* lesson—of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is that Cao Cao is the one who is successful in wresting the Mandate away from the Han. There are no illusions for the reader that Heaven has meant for him to claim it. Yet, the episode just discussed sets into play the cruel and deliberate subversion of the Emperor's power and safety by his own advisors. Cao Cao literally takes Han Emperor Xian as hostage, although (as also mentioned above) Liu Bei challenges Cao Cao's legitimacy. Notwithstanding, Cao Cao does take the Han throne, and while Liu Bei is focusing his fury on Sun Quan (the son of Sun Jian who long ago had battled

²¹⁶ See Chapter 1.

²¹⁷ Lo, 1: p.138.

Dong Zhuo over Luoyang*) because of the death of his Peach Garden “brother,” Lord Guan Yu, Cao Cao accepts an expedient Wu allegiance with Wei to undermine Liu Bei’s misdirected purposes.²¹⁸

But even as Liu Bei and Sun Quan strategize against each other, Cao Cao’s own plan to “seize” the Mandate disintegrates before his eyes. Reinforcing his lack of virtue and worthiness, the appearance of Lord Guan Yu’s ghost prompts Cao Cao to create a “Foundation Hall” (Chapter 78). He believes that this new official building will not include the taunting apparition or the reminder of what Cao Cao considers to be a weakness—his belief in the supernatural. But when Cao Cao insists on harvesting the only lumber available for such a structure from a sacred pear tree whose “leafy canopy . . . seemed to reach the Milky Way,” we find that *no one* can cut down the tree. “I am held in fear and respect by all,” he says, “from the Son of Heaven to the common man. What perverse spirit here dares my wishes?”²¹⁹ When Cao Cao himself attempts to control this spirit of nature, the sword he uses clangs as if it had hit metal, and blood “splashes” all over the frightened “king” of Wei.²²⁰ He has no virtue and, therefore, he has no support from heaven for his mandate of power according to this traditional interpretation from the author.

His rejection of the supernatural (thus Heaven) and his incapacity to relate to the natural world establishes for certain that he cannot manipulate the Mandate in the long term for two reasons. First of all, the pear tree guards the Vaulting Dragon Pool Temple²²¹ that honors the *fire* of the dragon, with its indestructible Han nature, coming into play, even in Wei where earth is the strongest virtue. Secondly, just as with Liu Bei, Cao Cao does not have the necessary

²¹⁸ Luo, p. 593. * See page 70.

²¹⁹ Ibid., p. 591.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

interconnection with the natural world, as the Son of Heaven must actually embody. The natural world directly connects the Son of Heaven to the supernatural—to the cosmos. But in fact, Cao Cao's encounters with several supernatural phenomena sicken him to the point of death,²²² a counterpoint to Liu Bei's illness when he assumes the Mandate of Heaven. (See page 69.)

Truly his father's son, Cao Pi continues the family tradition, eliminating any threats to his ascension to his father's power (Chapter 79). His Grand Corps Commander and his Grand Astrologer (both appointed by this new king) advise that portents point to a change of royal houses: "strange manifestations were reported: in Shiyi county a phoenix showed itself, in Linzi a unicorn appeared, and in Ye itself a yellow dragon was seen."²²³

Portents of change that connect civil strife to natural disasters or symbolic portents as those mentioned above were manipulated or fabricated and described with a level of skepticism that revealed that only those who were *not* elite would have accepted them as legitimate.²²⁴ Thus, in the epic, the Mandate is undermined, and the charade of legitimacy the father had begun continues with Cao Pi as "over forty civil and military officials" enter the royal chambers to use their interpretations of these signs to justify forcing Emperor Xian's "ceremony of abdication": "They beseech [His] Majesty to emulate the ancient sage-king Yao by ceremonially relinquishing the mountains, rivers, dynastic shrines to the new king of Wei. This will fulfill the will of Heaven and satisfy the minds of men."²²⁵ But Emperor Xian challenges this insult by asking what he's actually done improperly to cancel the Han Mandate. Cao Pi's men verify their

²²² Ibid., pp. 591–592.

²²³ Ibid., p. 602.

²²⁴ C. B. Sargent, *Wang Mang: A Translation of the Official Account of His Rise to Power as Given in the History of the Former Han Dynasty*. 1947, reprint (Shanghai: Graphic Art Book Co. Westport, CN: Hyperion Press, 1977), pp. 140–180, quoted in Bennet Bronson, "Order, Legitimacy, and Wealth in Ancient China," *Order, Legitimacy, and Wealth in Ancient States* edited by Janet E. Richards and Mary Van Buren (New York: Cambridge, 2000), p. 123–4.

²²⁵ Luo, pp. 603–604.

leader's worthiness by responding that since he had come to the throne "grains grow luxuriantly and sweet dew has dropped from the skies."²²⁶ Moreover the augury "graphs properly joined together read 'Wei Xuchang'—that is, 'Wei to receive the abdication of Han in the capital at Xuchang.'"²²⁷

Ironically, after the entire affair is completed, Cao Pi, as with his father, encounters a supernatural "rejection" of his claim: "as the new emperor began descending stairs from his throne to prostrate himself [in a ritual ceremony of thanks to Heaven and earth], a freak storm sprang up, driving sand and stones before it like a sudden downpour. All went dark; the altar lanterns blew out" (Chapter 80).²²⁸ And not surprisingly, as with his father, Cao Pi believes that the capital buildings are haunted; therefore, he moves the court back to Luoyang—where the virtue of fire is stronger than his own element of earth and where the Han have a traditional supernatural connection to nature itself. This cosmic connection is first seen long ago when Emperor Qin first saw signs of the new Han Mandate coming into being and therefore sought to destroy Han Gaozu (Liu Bang) who fled to the wilderness. His wife could always find him, though, because "There [were] always signs in the clouds over the place where [Liu Bang was]."²²⁹

Two of the portents mentioned earlier that Cao Pi's followers interpreted—the phoenix and the yellow dragon—both are associated with the Han's element, fire. Significantly, also, the unicorn is associated with eternal purity, perhaps Heaven itself. Although all of these *may* be interpreted as good omens, in regard to its history, these manifestations appear to be rejections of a Cao dynastic "mandate." However, this rejection does not stop the family from ending the four

²²⁶ Ibid., p. 604.

²²⁷ Ibid., pp. 604–605.

²²⁸ Ibid., p. 608.

²²⁹ Bronson, p. 123.

hundred-year-old rule of the Han and calling into question the theory of rule by Mandate, as with Liu Bei.

We see that nature and the supernatural realm appear to reject those who do not actually receive the Mandate of Heaven. Although the people may support either an extraordinarily kind or exceptionally cruel leader, according to Luo Guanzhong's story, the Mandate is manifested in the signs from Heaven and the natural world as they connect to the Son of Heaven. Cao Cao's house falls regardless of all its political and military strategies and manufactured support because it focuses on gaining power through popular acceptance and maintaining that power—rather than focusing on saving the order of the state.

Conclusions

Forty-five years after the establishment of the Cao throne Sima Yan (Cao Cao's former general) claims the throne ostensibly to "aveng[e] the house of Han" (Chapter 119).²³⁰ Yet he follows Cao Pi's model by forcing Cao Cao's grandson, Cao Huan, to abdicate."²³¹ Prophetically and practically, a poet of later times observes: "Wei swallowed Han, and then Jin swallowed Wei; / From Heaven's turning wheel no man can hide."²³² The Mandate claimed through the sovereignty of the people and political manipulation eventually fails. Similarly, Liu Bei fails to save the state and loses a Mandate that his advisors coerce him into claiming. As mentioned earlier, a great leader is a student of human experience, according to Sunzi, and for this reason is creative and adaptable rather than rigid—completely the opposite of Liu Bei when the Han dynasty needs him most. The people's opinion that he had the Mandate does not matter because he does not have cosmic authority. Clearly, he embodies neither *Tian ming* nor Sunzi's ideal

²³⁰ Luo., p. 923.

²³¹ Ibid., p. 922.

²³² Ibid., p. 923.

leader who would not seek or depend upon the Mandate of Heaven for the survival of the state.

As for Cao Cao, do we dare entertain the idea that he could be considered ideal according to the criteria set forth in *The Art of War*? Admittedly, he does succeed on the battlefield with no dependency on Heaven, although he appears to enjoy a tacit understanding among his court that winning equates to the manifestation of Heaven's mandate. Additionally, his commoners believe that success translates to the Mandate of Heaven. The existence of a new dynasty is all the evidence required to prove that the Mandate has been reassigned.²³³ Might is right, but the appearance of virtue is also important to the masses.

[T]he grand abstractions of political theory and ritual [are] less essential than the perception that the system [does] function: . . . This indeed was what the Mandate of Heaven was all about, a political, social, economic, and environmental system that could be seen by everyone to be reasonably successful.²³⁴

Moreover, the Han's appointed aristocracy had taken the place of the religious leadership that, in the past, identified the Son of Heaven based on careful analysis of action and character—as well as signs that nature would be in harmony with *Tian ming*. But should they analyze Cao Cao's character or the manner in which he reacted to situations he found himself in, traditional advisers would have found Cao Cao to be a leader without virtue. But regardless of the lack of this crucial characteristic, the historical context in which he lived lends insight into his character's overwhelming success without it.

The old Confucian elite had lost its position throughout the Qin dynasty, as mentioned earlier, and by the time the Han began their rule, “power and [Confucian philosophical or intellectual] cultural prestige did not go hand in hand.”²³⁵ The revolutionary elite did not have the

²³³ Bronson, p. 124.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

same level of cultural and intellectual training or interest as had gone before, and ritual was dispensed with—until Emperor Gaozu (Liu Bang) realized that his newly “elected” elite had much to be desired in terms of civic behavior. Han advisor Shusun Tong suggested that cultivating benevolence and righteousness among them would reduce the threat of revolt, as would a return to ritual to achieve the semblance of order without the excessive punishment and laws of the Qin.²³⁶

Eventually this contrived religiosity became a basis for a well-established dynasty whose rulers were declared legitimate based on their power and *perceived* virtue. We see in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* the culmination of the Han’s power base revealed in two characters in our study. Han practices of Heaven worship with its people’s mandate diminished the authentic Confucian–influenced Liu Bei’s capacity to lead, while Cao Cao may actually appear to be an individual who could have been the embodiment of Sunzi’s military teachings. However, Cao Cao selfishly causes the state to fall instead of working to save it. In an act of pure political opportunism, the Han Emperor’s advisors defect, interpreting portents that insure that Cao Cao will gain the Mandate—if he will only take advantage of the situations he finds himself in. He does take their advice and bides his time, luring the Emperor away from safety and into his trap. Sunzi also would have advised a general to wait until the enemy is at a complete disadvantage so there would be no bloodshed upon capture or capitulation—the ideal victory. Yet Cao Cao is *not* altogether Sunzi’s ideal. This fact in itself is not as significant as his having razed the Han Dynasty with no supernatural power and no Mandate.

Although *the Romance of the Three Kingdoms* does reveal the significance of the Mandate of Heaven in relation to the culture of China, the work is a romance—with its folk tales,

²³⁶ Ibid., p.122.

its enchantment with the supernatural, and its grand narrative illuminating a philosophy that had been useful in controlling the populace in a glorious past. Although it is central to the novel, the concept of the Mandate of Heaven is compromised by reality. Liu Bei's failure while relying on it and Cao Cao's victory without it serve to illustrate that the theory of the Mandate of Heaven during the Han Dynasty as portrayed in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is a bankrupt ideal.

Future Studies

After examining the concepts of the Mandate of Heaven, benevolence, and leadership with Sunzi's philosophical underpinnings in mind, one may more readily approach an evaluation of the entire epic in regard to the influence of Sunzi's techniques or policies. As historians, our future studies of the classics *The Art of War* and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* may assist others to project successful lessons of personal interactions and leadership practices. Success? Failure? The *Dao* of Administration?²³⁷ The answer to these questions will depend on deep analyses of philosophies and qualities that have proven value—yet too often have been misunderstood. We have the opportunity to achieve the latter by encouraging a society looking on the surface of these classic texts for its own reflection to “read on.”²³⁸

²³⁷ Sun-tzu, Sawyer and Sawyer, pp. 221–222. (As mentioned in Chapter III) “Unify their courage to be as one through the Tao of Administration. Realize the appropriate employment of the hard and soft through the patterns of terrain.”

²³⁸ All chapters except the final one in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Moss Roberts edition, end with “Read on.”

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