

From History to Fiction

—the Popular Image of Kuan Yü

by Winston L. Y. Yang

IN CHINA, THERE ARE numerous historical figures whose lives have become the object of mythologization. From such ancient rulers as King Wen and King Wu down to such Ch'ing personalities as Hung Hsiu-ch'üan 洪秀全 and the Empress Dowager, countless sovereigns and commoners officials and generals, writers and bandits, all have had their deeds and words transfigured. Among rulers, to name a few, we find such emperors as Liu Pei 劉備 and Empress Wu 武則天, whose lives have been much fictionalized and their images thus distorted; this has been the case with such scholar-officials as Chu-ko Liang 諸葛亮 and Wang An-shih 王安石, not to mention such essentially fictional heroes as Sung Chiang 宋江 and Pao Kung 包公. Many heroes have been deified and villains further maligned over the centuries. In temples built especially for them, some heroes have even been worshipped by the populace. Hero worship has always been an important part in Chinese life; even today heroes selected from the ranks of the peasants, soldiers, and workers are widely praised and revered in China.

To a very great extent, such mythologization has been the contribution of popular fiction writers and playwrights. Among popular Chinese heroes, few have been idealized so intensively as Yüeh Fei 岳飛 (1103-41) and Kuan Yü 關羽 (d. 219); both have been deified as symbols of loyalty and righteousness,¹ long regarded as two of the foremost Confucian virtues. Yüeh Fei of the Southern Sung dynasty has been fictionalized as a patriotic and heroic warrior, whose campaigns to save his country are said to have been frustrated time and again by the disloyal minister, Ch'in Kuei 秦檜; Kuan Yü of the Three Kingdoms period is popularly known to this

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¹Yüeh Fei as a case study of China's heritage of loyalty is treated by James T. C. Liu, who suggests that loyalty is at present "an agonizing question to

many concerned Chinese who face either divisive circumstances or imposition of particular political lines" and that loyalty is "never a simple matter in politics" and "often produced great tensions and even ironical tragedies that filled the pages in Chinese history." ("Yüeh Fei and China's Heritage of Loyalty," *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXXI, 1972, p. 291).

day as a man of supreme loyalty, righteousness, and divine prowess. Both have become exemplars of heroic virtues and have been worshipped in special temples for centuries. Few others share with these two the honor of a place in the official pantheon. Even today one can still find temples dedicated to them in many parts of China. Yet, both are, in a sense, tragic heroes, as both died without accomplishing their historical missions; in no way do they deserve such high honor as far as their historical actuality is concerned.

Over the centuries, Kuan Yü and Yüeh Fei, like many other Chinese historical figures, have had their historical realities gradually transformed into entirely different literary images. Such transformation has been accomplished primarily by popular literature, especially vernacular fiction. Needless to say, the literary images of both have not been the instant creations of popular writers; rather, they have evolved over a long period of time. In this article, I propose to examine the various historical and literary images of Kuan Yü, which have developed over the centuries after his death, as a case study of the literary transformation of historical figures in Chinese literature; Yüeh Fei will be dealt with in a separate study in the future.²

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA on Kuan Yü are scanty. The earliest reliable historical source is, of course, Ch'en Shou's 陳壽 biography of the hero in the *San-kuo chih* 三國志, which was compiled about sixty years after Kuan's death. No contemporary sources with references to Kuan other than the writings of such San-kuo figures as Chu-ko Liang and Ts'ao Ts'ao 曹操 have survived. Even in these writings references to Kuan are scanty and shed little light on his historical image. In any event, most of these references have been incorporated into the *San-kuo chih*. Ch'en Shou's biography has remained, therefore, the single most important and reliable historical source about Kuan's life and character. Thus, the proper place to begin an examination of his historical image is indubitably the *San-kuo chih*.

Ch'en Shou's biography of Kuan Yü is brief indeed: it contains less than fifteen hundred characters. It begins with a statement on Kuan's birth place and his various names, and a brief description of Kuan's friendship with, and devotion to, Liu Pei. Kuan's temporary surrender to Ts'ao Ts'ao is then treated briefly to demonstrate his loyalty to Liu. However, Ch'en Shou devotes considerable space to the description of Kuan's utter vanity, ignorance of Chu-kuo Liang's strategy, overconfidence, haughtiness, and arrogance, which brought about Kuan's own destruction. In concluding the biographies of Kuan and four other Shu generals, Ch'en Shou makes the following comments on Kuan Yü and Chang Fei:

Both Kuan Yü and Chang Fei were known as a match of ten thousand men, who served their Sovereign as bravely as tigers. [Kuan]

²My study of the literary transformation of Yüeh Fei will be included in my forthcoming book, *History and Fiction: A Study of Literary Transformation of Selected Historical Figures*. For an analysis of the myths of Yüeh Fei, see Hellmut Wilhelm, "From Myth to Myth: The Case of Yüeh Fei's Biography," *Confucian Personalities* (1962), ed. by A. F. Wright and

D. C. Twitchett; reproduced in *Confucianism and Chinese Civilization* (1964), ed. by A. F. Wright, pp. 211-226. A more recent study is by Edward H. Kaplan, "Yüeh Fei and the Founding of the Southern Sung" (Ph.D. Dissertation. Iowa City, University of Iowa, 1970).

KUAN YÜ. The woodcuts used in this article are reproduced from Kuan-sheng-ti-chun sheng-chi t'u-chih ch'üan-chi 關聖帝君聖蹟圖誌全集, an 1802 edition of Lu Chan's 盧湛 Kuan-ti sheng-chi t'u-chih ch'üan-chi 關帝聖蹟圖誌全集, published in 1692-1693.



Yü requited Lord Ts'ao [Ts'ao] for the favors he had received and [Chang] Fei magnanimously restored freedom to Yen Yen; in these acts they showed that they were the first gentlemen of the land. But [Kuan] Yü was strong-willed and haughty; [Chang] Fei was violent and ungrateful. That they met their sad ends because of these defects is in accord with the law of fate.³

Ch'en Shou's concept of Kuan is probably best described by the words "strong-willed and haughty" (剛而自矜). In Ch'en's biographies of other San-kuo figures, references to Kuan are numerous, but Kuan's image as presented in these other biographies is quite consistent with the one found in his biography of the general.

Most later historical sources about San-kuo history are based essentially on Ch'en Shou's *San-kuo chih* in their portrayal of Kuan Yü. Quoting from a variety of sources most of which are now lost, Pei Sung-chih's 裴松之 lengthy commentary on the *San-kuo chih* further strengthens the image of Kuan as established by Ch'en Shou. Even Ssu-ma Kuang, writing almost eight hundred years after Kuan's death, presents a similar characterization in his *Tzu chih t'ung chien* 資治通鑑. In fact, Kuan's image as a haughty and reckless warrior emerges with even greater clarity

³*San-kuo chih* (Commentary by P'ei Sung-chih; punctuated by Ch'en Nai-ch'ien 陳乃乾. Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1959, 5 vols.), IV, *chüan* 36, p. 951. Hereafter abbreviated as *SKC*. It is difficult

to translate the word "kang 剛." My translation "strong-willed" is, needless to say, not a perfect rendering of the word. Other possible translations include "obstinate," "stubborn," and "harsh."

from Ssu-ma Kuang's chronological account of San-kuo events.⁴

The literary transformation of Kuan Yü's historical actuality probably began after the appearance of Ssu-ma Kuang's *Tzu chih t'ung chien*, as we cannot find any fictionalized portrayal of Kuan in earlier sources. Even in Liu I-ch'ing's 劉義慶 *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* 世說新語, there are no anecdotes about the hero despite his inclusion of many interesting stories about other San-kuo figures, such as Ts'ao Ts'ao and Chu-ko Liang; nor are there any references to Kuan in the surviving *pien-wen* texts or in early *hua-pen* 話本 anthologies, such as the *Ch'ing-p'ing-shan-t'ang* 清平山堂 and *San-yen* 三言 collections. Even in such bibliographies as Ch'ao Li's 趙璪 *Paò-wen-t'ang shu-mu* 寶文堂書目 and Ch'ien Tseng's 錢曾 *Yeh-shih-yüan shu-mu* 也是園書目, no references to *hua-pen* stories which might deal with Kuan Yü are listed.

It was not until the Yüan period that we find the beginning of the literary transformation of Kuan Yü, first in several *tsa chü* 雜劇 plays and later in a *p'ing-hua* 平話 work, entitled *San-kuo chih p'ing-hua* 三國志平話. Among the many surviving *tsa chü* plays about San-kuo figures and events, only three are entirely devoted to Kuan, including *Kuan Yün-ch'ang ch'ien li tu hsing hsia* 關雲長千里獨行俠 and *Kuan Yün-ch'ang Pai ho fang shui* 關雲長白河放水, both by anonymous writers, and Kuan Han-ch'ing's 關漢卿 *Kuan ta wang tu fu tan tao hui* 關大王獨赴單刀會. Cheng Kuang-tsu's 鄭光祖 *Ku-lao kuan san chan Lü Pu* 古牢關三戰呂布 and Kuan Han-ch'ing's *Kuan Chang shuang fu Hsi Shu meng* 關張雙赴西蜀夢 deal with Kuan and his close comrades, Liu Pei and Chang Fei 張飛. In addition, an early Ming play of unknown authorship and devoted entirely to Kuan, entitled *Kuan Yün-ch'ang i yung tz'u chin* 關雲長義勇自盡 is extant.

Although these plays present different aspects of Kuan Yü's life and character, they all tend to glorify him. His loyalty, righteousness, devotion, and bravery are emphasized and many dramatic details lacking solid historical authenticity have been created to ennoble him; his historical image as a haughty, arrogant, and strategically ignorant warrior of excessive pride and over-confidence is now completely gone.⁵

The *San-kuo chih p'ing-hua*, a work atrocious in style and sketchy in narration,⁶ continued the process of glorifying Kuan but made no attempt to deify him despite its departures from documented history in many areas. His loyalty and bravery are duly noted and even exaggerated, but nowhere does the author present the warrior as an unsufferable general of divine bravery. His tragic death is described as an unadulterated fact. No mystic elements and no dramatic details have been added to make his death a heroic one.⁷ However, the author describes neither the general's arrogance and haughtiness nor his excessive pride and over-confidence,

⁴See, especially, *chüan* 68 and 69, *Hsin chiao Tzu chih t'ung chien chu* 新校資治通鑑注 (Taipei: Shih-chieh shu-chü, 1962), IV, pp. 2148-2209.

⁵For an analysis of Kuan Yü's images as presented in two of these plays, see Frank Ross, "Kuan Yü in Drama: Translations and Critical Discussion of Two Yüan Plays." Ph.D. Dissertation (Austin: University

of Texas, 1976).

⁶C. T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), pp. 35-37.

⁷*San-kuo chih p'ing-hua* (Shanghai: Ku-tien wen-hsüeh ch'u-pan she, 1955), p. 124.

so his image in the *San-kuo chih p'ing-hua* is essentially the same as that found in the extant *Yüan tsa-chü* plays.

ABOUT TWO HUNDRED YEARS after the appearance of the *San-kuo chih p'ing-hua* there emerged what is now the earliest surviving version of the *San-kuo chih yen-i*.⁸ 三國志演義, which has long been attributed to Lo Kuan-chung 羅貫中 and is undoubtedly the most important source in the literary transformation of Kuan Yü. The standard version of the novel, edited by Mao Tsung-kang 毛宗崗, is essentially the same as the original Lo Kuan-chung version despite some stylistic changes. The characterization of Kuan Yü in the novel is much more sophisticated than those in the *San-kuo chih p'ing-hua* version and in the *tsa-chü* plays mentioned earlier, and thus warrants a detailed analysis.

There is little doubt that Lo Kuan-chung has high regard and admiration for Kuan Yü. In numerous chapters Lo devotes much space to the description of Kuan's impressive looks, especially his long beard and well-built body, his unusual bravery, and his martial stature; his renowned mighty sword is noted whenever he defeats and kills an enemy general. In fact, his killing of such famous enemy generals as Yen Liang 顏良 and P'ang Te 龐德 are given special attention and described in vivid detail. At least ten chapters are partially devoted to the description of Kuan's martial skills.⁹ Even his death, brought about by his over-confidence and ignorance of Chu-ko Liang's grand strategy, is described as more or less a heroic death rather than as the result of his own tragic miscalculation.¹⁰

Many episodes historically unfounded and obviously created by Lo Kuan-chung or borrowed from popular legends have led scholars to believe that Kuan has been portrayed in the novel essentially as a man of dignity, righteousness, extreme nobility, and superhuman bravery. For instance, to demonstrate Kuan's loyalty, Lo dramatizes Kuan's continued devotion to Liu Pei during his temporary surrender to Ts'ao Ts'ao despite Ts'ao's gracious treatment of him.¹¹ Another episode illustrating Kuan as a man of generosity and righteousness is the one in which he releases Ts'ao Ts'ao at the Hua-jung Pass 華容道 after the latter's defeat at the Battle of Ch'ih-pi 赤壁.¹² Roy Andrew Miller believes that the fictional Kuan Yü has completely replaced the historical one in the Chinese imagination.¹³ But there are many other episodes in the novel which show that Lo has adhered fairly closely to the image of Kuan projected by Ch'en Shou in his official history. Since the latter episodes have generally been overlooked by scholars, some of the more important ones are discussed below.

⁸This is the Chia-ching 嘉靖 edition of the novel, entitled *San-kuo chih t'ung-su yen-i* 三國志通俗演義, first published in 1522 and reprinted by the Commercial Press in 1929.

⁹See, for instance, Chapters 26, 27, 66, and 75 in the Mao Tsung-kang version, *San-kuo yen-i* 三國演義 (Peking: Tso-chia ch'u-pan she, 1956). Hereafter abbreviated as *SKYI*.

¹⁰*SKYI*, II, Chapter 77, pp. 615-619.

¹¹This episode is found in the *SKYI*, I, Chapters 25-28, pp. 199-230.

¹²This episode is included in the *SKYI*, I, chapter 50, pp. 400-402.

¹³"Introduction" to *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Translated by C. H. Brewitt-Taylor. Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1959), I, p. x.

ENTRUSTED WITH TASK of guarding the vital region of Ching-chou.



The *San-kuo chih yen-i* has recorded so many favorable remarks on Kuan Yü by his admirers, Ts'ao Ts'ao included, that some of the less favorable comments on him are often overlooked. Among Kuan Yü's critics, Chu-ko Liang has probably presented the fairest evaluation of him. Take, for instance, the following excerpt:

Several days later, while [Chu-ko] K'ung-ming was sitting with [Kuan] Yün-ch'ang and others, it was reported that Kuan P'ing had arrived. All present were alarmed. Kuan P'ing came in and submitted a letter from Liu Pei. K'ung-ming read the letter which said, "On the seventh day of the seventh month of this year Counselor P'ang was killed on the Slope of Fallen Phoenix by an arrow shot by Chang Jen."

K'ung-ming wailed, and all present shed tears. Then K'ung-ming said, "Since our lord is hemmed in at the P'ei Pass and can neither advance nor retreat, I must go there to help him." Yün-ch'ang asked, "If you leave, who will guard Ching-chou? Ching-chou is a vital region and a great concern for us all."

K'ung-ming said, "Our lord did not say clearly, but I know what was on his mind." Then he showed the letter to the others and said, "The letter entrusts me with the defense of the region and I am to find one equal to the task. But since he asked Kuan P'ing to be his messenger, he must have Yün-ch'ang in mind as the man to take over this important job. And I know Yün-ch'ang will do his best to safeguard this

area to honor the pledge taken long ago at the Peach Garden. The responsibility is not a light one; you have to do your best."

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

"All the future rests with you, General," said K'ung-ming as he raised the seal to hand it over to Kuan.

Yün-ch'ang replied, "When a man of honor accepts such a task, only death will release him from it."

The word "death" displeased K'ung-ming. He was thinking of not handing the seal to him, but then his word had gone forth. He went on, "Now if Ts'ao Ts'ao attacks, what would you do?"

Yün-ch'ang answered, "Repel him with all my strength."

"But if Ts'ao Ts'ao and Sun Ch'üan both attack, what then?"

Yün-ch'ang replied, "Repel them both."

K'ung-ming said, "In that case Ching-chou would be endangered. I have eight words for you, and if you remember them well, Ching-chou will be safe."

"What eight words?"

"North, repel Ts'ao Ts'ao; east befriend Sun Ch'üan."

"These words I will engrave in my heart," replied Yün-ch'ang.¹⁴

It is obvious that Chu-ko Liang is extremely reluctant to entrust the defense of Ching-chou 荊州 to Kuan Yü because of his obvious lack of confidence in the famed general. He eventually does so only because Kuan is Liu Pei's personal choice. Chu-ko Liang's evaluation of Kuan proves sound soon afterwards: Kuan violates the established policy of close alliance with Wu 吳 which Kuan promises to follow with unswerving devotion; he spurns Sun Ch'üan's 孫權 friendly overtures which eventually leads to the latter's determination to seize Ching-chou by forming an alliance with Ts'ao Ts'ao.¹⁵ Under the combined attack of Sun and Ts'ao, Kuan loses the strategically important Ching-chou, which brings about his own death.¹⁶ The loss of Ching-chou, as a result of Kuan's tragic mistake, marks the beginning of the gradual decline of Shu. In numerous passages Lo Kuan-chung exposes Kuan's extreme pride, over-confidence, and carelessness. The following is only one of such passages:

When Kuan Yü mustered his fighting men in Mai-ch'eng, he had but three hundred in all. The food was gone. That night many men of Wu outside the city walls called to their friends by name, and many of these slipped over the wall and deserted, reducing the small force still further. No rescue force appeared, and Kuan was at the

¹⁴SKYI, II, Chapter 63, p. 506. The translation is adapted from C. T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel*, p. 46. This incident is not historically founded.

¹⁵To promote friendly relations with Shu, Sun Ch'üan sends Chu-ko Chin to see Kuan Yü to propose marriage for one of Sun's sons to one of Kuan's daughters. But Kuan refuses the match and insults

the matchmaker. Kuan's unreasoned action greatly offends Sun and marks the beginning of the deteriorating relations between the two states. The incident is described in SKYI, II, Chapter 73, p. 580. It is also documented in the official history, SKC, IV, *chüan* 36, p. 941.

¹⁶SKYI, II, Chapters 76-77, pp. 607-617.

end of his resources. He bewailed to Wang Fu, "I regret that I did not accept your advice. What can we do in this critical situation?"

"I think even if Tzu-ya could come to life again he would be helpless in this case," replied [Wang] Fu, weeping.

Chao Lei said, "Liu Feng and Meng Ta have surely decided not to send help from Shang-yung. Why not abandon this besieged city and flee to Hsi-ch'uan, where we may consolidate our forces to regain the area in the future?"

"I have been thinking of doing the same thing," said Kuan Yü.

Then he ascended the walls and surveyed the situation. Noting that the enemy soldiers outside the north gate were not numerous, he asked some of the inhabitants, "What is the terrain like north of here?"

They replied, "There are only narrow paths there, but by them one may get to Hsi-ch'uan."

"We will go that way to-night," said Kuan.

Wang Fu opposed it, saying, "We would surely fall into an ambush. The main road would be safer."

"There may be an ambush, but do I fear that?" said Kuan Yü.¹⁷

Thus, Kuan Yü decides to take the narrow paths and soon afterwards he is on the road. He is captured in an ambush by Sun Ch'üan's force and is put to death by Sun. The *San-kuo-chih yen-i* gives the following moving account of Kuan's heroic death which also reveals that his tragic end is mainly due to his own stupidity and arrogance.

At dawn Sun Ch'üan heard that Lord Kuan and his son had been captured. With great joy he assembled all his officers in his tent. Before long, Ma Chung came hustling Lord Kuan in.

"I have long admired your virtues," said [Sun] Ch'üan, "So I wanted to form a close personal relationship with you by having my son marry your daughter. Why did you turn down the offer? You have long held yourself to be invincible in the world, but now why are you captured by me? Would you, General, submit to me now?"

But Kuan Yü only answered harshly, "You green-eyed boy! You purple-bearded rat! I have made a covenant in the Peach Garden with my brothers to uphold the Han. Do you think that I will befriend a rebel such as you? Now that I am a victim of your vile schemes, all I have to do is to die at once. Why bother to say anything more?"

"Yün-ch'ang is a real hero, and I love him," said Sun Ch'üan to those officers standing near. "I will treat him well and endeavor to win him over. What do you think?"

Said Tso Hsien, an assistant, "No. When Ts'ao Ts'ao had hold of this man he treated him lavishly well. He created him a marquis; he feasted him day after day at public and private banquets; he gave him gold and silver. With such a nice treatment he failed to retain him. The man broke through his gates, slew his generals and went away. Today Ts'ao Ts'ao fears him, and almost moved the capital for dread of him.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, Chapter 77, p. 615. This incident is not documented in the official history.



APPOINTED CHIEF of "The Five Tiger Generals."

Now that you have captured him, destroy him. Evil will come if you spare him."

Sun Ch'üan reflected for some time.

"You are right," said he presently, and gave the order for execution.

So father and son met their fate together in the tenth month of the twenty-fourth year of Chien-an [219]. Lord Kuan was then fifty-eight years old.¹⁸

IN THE FOLLOWING passage from the novel, Kuan Yü is honored as the chief of the five "Tiger Generals" by Liu Pei, and Kuan has an unusual reaction to the occasion:

Greatly pleased, the Prince of Han-chung [Liu Pei] sent immediately Fei Shih, a high official from his Board of War, to take the patent of his new title to Kuan Yü in Ching-chou. Yün-ch'ang went out of the city to welcome the envoy with great deference and conducted him into the city. After they had arrived at the official residence, Yün-ch'ang asked, "What new title has the Prince of Han-chung conferred upon me?"

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 616-617. In the official history, there is only a brief reference to Kuan Yü's death: "[Sun] Ch'üan dispatched his generals to attack [Kuan] Yü from behind and killed [Kuan] and his son P'ing at

Lin-chu." (*SKC*, IV, *chüan* 36, p. 941). Lo Kuan-chung has apparently added fictional details to describe Kuan's death.

"Chief of the Five Tiger Generals," replied Shih.

"And who are the five?" Yün-ch'ang asked.

"They are Kuan, Chang, Chao, Ma and Huang," Shih replied.

"I-te is my brother," said Kuan Yü angrily. "Meng-ch'i comes of a famous family and Tzu-lung has been with my elder brother so long that he has become a younger brother of mine. It is right for him to be put on a level with me. But what sort of man is this Huang Chung that he shares the same rank with me? A man of honor does not stand shoulder to shoulder with any old soldier that comes along."

And he refused to accept the seal.

"General, you are wrong," said Shih, laughing. "Of old, Hsiao Ho Ts'ao Ts'an helped Emperor Kao-tsu in his great enterprise and were very dear friends, while Han Hsin was but a runaway leader from Ch'u. Yet Hsin became a prince, and so was placed over the heads of the other two. I have never heard that Hsiao and Ts'ao resented it. Now although the Prince of Han-chung has his Five Tiger Generals, he is still your brother and he regards you and himself as parts of the same entity. You are the Prince and the Prince is you. How can you be considered the equal of anyone else? The prince has always treated you with the greatest kindness. You should share his sorrow and joy, as well as disaster and good fortune, and should not question whether an official is high or low. General, please think it over carefully."

Kuan Yü understood and said respectfully, "I was confused. Without your enlightening advice, I would have made a great mistake." He promptly accepted the seal with humility.¹⁹

Kuan Yü's pride and vanity are vividly brought out in the above passage. Similarly, after Ma Ch'ao 馬超 is honored with the title of "General in Charge of the Pacification of the West" ("P'ing-hsi Chiang-chün 平西將軍"), Kuan Yü feels greatly hurt. He sends word to Liu Pei through Kuan P'ing 關平 that he will challenge Ma in a contest to decide who is the better warrior. Liu is understandably shocked, but Chu-ko Liang, who knows Kuan's character best, devises a plan to deal with Kuan's rash challenge. This is described in the following passage:

K'ung-ming said, "Don't worry. I will personally write him a reply." Afraid that Yün-ch'ang would get impatient, Liu Pei asked K'ung-ming to write the letter right away. Then he gave it to Kuan P'ing and made him return to Ching-chou by night.

When P'ing returned to Ching-chou, Yün-ch'ang asked him, "Did you mention the contest involving me and Ma Meng-ch'i?"

P'ing replied, "Here's a letter from our military commander."

Yün-ch'ang opened it and read:

"I understand you are anxious to have a contest with Meng-ch'i. In my estimation, though Meng-ch'i is unusually brave, he is but of the class of Ch'ing Pu and P'eng Yüeh. It is fitting that he should

¹⁹SKYI, II, Chapter 73, p. 589. This incident is the creation of Lo Kuan-chung. not documented in the official history; it is probably

compete with I-te [Chang Fei] but surely he cannot approach your unrivaled excellence. Now you are given the charge of guarding Ching-chou, a charge that is grave indeed. If you come to Szechwan and if in the meantime something happens to Ching-chou, you would be guilty of the greatest crime. I hope you will see the point clearly."

After finishing reading the letter, Yün-ch'ang stroked his beard and said with a satisfied smile, "K'ung-ming knows me thoroughly." He circulated the letter among his guests and thought no more of going to Szechwan [to have contest with Ma].²⁰

The above episode provides further evidence of Kuan Yü's extreme vanity and naiveness. Chu-ko Liang's flattery in the letter is sufficient to cool him off. But this episode, like many others employed by Lo Kuan-chung to expose Kuan's weaknesses, is recorded in the *San-kuo chih*. In this instance Lo has only slightly elaborated what is found in the official history:

When [Kuan] Yü heard that Ma Ch'ao, who was not an old acquaintance, came to surrender, he wrote Chu-ko Liang to ask with whom Ch'ao should be compared as a general. Liang, who knew that Yü was proud of himself, answered, "Meng-ch'i has both military and civilian talents and is unusually brave; he can be regarded as a true hero of our time. However, he is but of the class of Ch'ing [Pu] and P'eng [Yüeh]. It is fitting that he should compete with I-te but surely he cannot approach your unrivaled excellence." Yü had a beautiful beard, so Liang called him "Beard." After reading the letter Yü became greatly pleased and circulated it among his guests.²¹

AS MENTIONED EARLIER, it is his own over-confidence, arrogance, and carelessness which eventually bring about Kuan Yü's downfall. Chu-ko Liang, who understands Kuan's weaknesses probably more than anybody else does, upon learning of the warrior's death, makes the following significant remark to Liu Pei:

"My lord, please restrain your sadness. It has been said since ancient times, 'Birth and death are all controlled by fate.' Lord Kuan, who ordinarily was strong-willed and haughty, brought this disaster upon himself. You must now take good care of your health and consider revenge later."²²

The words "strong-willed and haughty" not only best summarize Kuan Yü's personality; they also provide explanations for his downfall. In fact, these words, as pointed out earlier, are taken from Ch'en Shou's official history by Lo Kuan-chung, who then has Chu-ko Liang utter them to Liu Pei. Apparently Lo agrees with Ch'en's estimation of Kuan Yü's character. However, as described previously, Lo has created numerous incidents elsewhere in the novel to glorify Kuan as a hero.

²⁰SKYI, II, Chapter 65, p. 527.

²²SKYI, II, Chapter 78, p. 623.

²¹SKC, IV, *Chüan* 36, p. 940.

Such a contradictory effort on Lo's part has puzzled scholars,²³ but there are reasons why Lo has done so.

During the Sung dynasty, or perhaps even as early as the T'ang, the historical Kuan Yü was gradually being hyperbolized to mythical proportions. Even though no Sung or Yüan *hua-pen* tales about Kuan have survived, there is evidence that during the Sung period oral stories about San-kuo history were so popular that some storytellers had become specialized in telling San-kuo tales.²⁴ Some of these tales had no doubt already glorified Kuan to some extent, and as time passed, he assumed an increasingly important role in popular religion.

In the surviving Yüan *tsa-chü* plays he has become a popular hero without a trace of the kind of tragic qualities as described in Ch'en Shou's *San-kuo chih*. By the end of the northern Sung he had already become a god and was worshipped in temples.²⁵ At the beginning of the Ming period he had been further deified as a supreme symbol of loyalty, righteousness, and undeviating devotion.²⁶ (In several episodes in the *San-kuo chih yen-i* Kuan is clearly described as a god.²⁷) Since the early nineteenth century, several Peking operas portraying Kuan more or less as a saint or god have been created,²⁸ and some of them are still staged with modifications in China today. However, it was in the middle of the seventeenth century that the long process to deify Kuan to the highest level was finally completed. He was accorded the supreme honor by the Ch'ing court in 1652: he was designated as "The Loyal, Righteous, Divine, Grand God of War."²⁹ And he had been so honored until almost the beginning of the twentieth century.

From what has been said about Lo Kuan-chung's characterization of Kuan Yü, it seems that Lo contradicts himself. It should be understood, however, that Lo, influenced by popular literature and writing at a time when Kuan had already become an object of national veneration and worship, could not but take the national sentiment into consideration and accord the hero all the glorification which had been heaped upon him in popular legends and myths.

Thus, Lo has created numerous details pertaining to Kuan's extraordinary bravery, loyalty, and nobility of character, in line with the popular image of the

²³See, for instance, the following criticism of Kuan Yü's characterization in the novel made by Hu Shih: "Again, they [Lo Kuan-chung and his revisers] want to portray a Kuan Yü of divine prowess, but he is reduced to an arrogant and stupid warrior." ("Preface" to *San-kuo chih yen-i*. Shanghai: Ya-tung t'u-shu-kuan, 1922), p. 10.

²⁴One of such specialized storytellers is named in the *Tung-ching meng hua lu* 東京夢華錄 (By Meng Yüan-lao 孟元老. Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1959), *chüan* 5, p. 138.

²⁵Huang Hua-chieh 黃華傑, *Kuan Kung-ti jen-ke yü shen-ke* 關公的人格與神格 (Taipei: Shang-wu yin-shu-kuan, 1967), p. 132.

²⁶Robert Ruhlmann, "Traditional Heroes in

Chinese Popular Fiction," *The Confucian Persuasion* (Ed. by Arthur Wright. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960), p. 174.

²⁷See, for instance, Chapters 77 and 83.

²⁸In *Ch'ing chü chü-mu chu-t'an* 清初劇目初探 (Compiled by T'ao Chün-ch'i 陶君啓 and edited by Chung-kuo hsi-ch'ü yen-chiu yüan 中國戲劇研究院. Shanghai: Shang-hai Wen-hua ch'u-pen she, 1957), a total of 148 Peking operas are listed. Of these at least ten deal with Kuan Yü.

²⁹Li Kuang-t'ao 李光濤, "Ch'ing Tai-tsung yü *San-kuo yen-i* 清太宗與三國演義," *Chung-yang yen-chü-yüan li-shih yü-yen yen-chü-so chi-k'an* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊.

hero. But only occasionally does he make Kuan appear a saint or god, as demanded by the popular beliefs of his time.³⁰ Yet, on the other hand, Lo follows closely the official history of the San-kuo period, *San-kuo chih*, his most important source, by showing Kuan's violation of the wise strategy as established by Chu-ko Liang, his naiveness, arrogance, haughtiness, stupidity, vanity, conceit, and over-confidence. By combining the popular image with the actual traits of character of the famed warrior, Lo portrays Kuan as a real human being with common human weaknesses as well as extraordinary strengths. In no way does Lo intend to deify Kuan or make him an unsufferable superhuman hero of divine prowess, as claimed by some scholars.³¹ Rather, he has portrayed Kuan as an unusual warrior with the flaws of excessive pride and over-confidence, which bring about his own tragic death.

I HAVE THUS TRACED the long process of the literary transformation of Kuan Yü from his historical reality to his eventual deification. The then surviving *hua-pen* stories, Yüan drama, *San-kuo chih p'ing-hua*, popular legends, myths, and religious beliefs,³² efforts made for political purposes by some Sung, Yüan, Ming, and Ch'ing emperors,³³ and, of course, Lo Kuan-chung's *San-kuo chih yen-i*, have all contributed to Kuan's deification. There has been found little evidence, however, that Lo Kuan-chung has in mind purposely to contribute much to the deification. In fact, in no way does he intend, as pointed out earlier, to glorify Kuan as a superhuman being or deify him as a god; instead, as clearly shown above, he presents Kuan as a real human being with common human weaknesses.

Unfortunately, most Chinese readers, somewhat blinded by popular myths and legends, have misread the novel. They have been unduly impressed by Lo's description of Kuan's heroic image, which essentially represents Lo's concession to popular taste; they have overlooked or chosen to disregard Kuan's numerous human weaknesses as repeatedly revealed by Lo in accordance with the historical record. Probably influenced by their own preconceptions from a variety of sources, Chinese readers tend to ignore the subtle, but more realistic, descriptions of Kuan which reduce him to an ordinary mortal being; they seem to have ignored Lo's description of Kuan's death, which is of his own making. It is not Lo Kuan-chung's intention, there, to deify Kuan Yü.³⁴

In Chinese literature, the treatment of Kuan Yü affords an excellent opportunity to illustrate the literary transformation of historical figures. Like Kuan, many other famous Chinese historical figures, notably Yüeh Fei and Chu-ko Liang, have gone through a similar literary transformation; their literary and folkloristic images have become quite different from their historical actualities.

³⁰See, especially, Chapter 77.

³³*Ibid.*, pp. 123-154.

³¹See, for instance, Huang Hua-chieh, *Kuan Kung ti jen-ke yü shen-ke*, pp. 100-122.

³²For a discussion of popular legends, myths, and religious beliefs about Kuan Yü, see Huang Hua-chieh, *Kuan Kung ti jen-ke yü shen-ke*, pp. 155-235.

³⁴Even as late as the 1930's there was still the popular belief in certain parts of China that Kuan Yü came into being from dragon blood. See "Kuan Yün-ch'ang shih lung hsüeh pien ch'eng ti 關雲長是龍血變成的," *Min shu* 民俗, no. 107 (April 9, 1930), pp. 14-16.

A Note on Mr. T'ao

T'ao Ch'eng-chang, an activist in organizing a Chinese revolution to overthrow the Ch'ing (Manchu) Empire around the turn of the century, was a native of Shaohsing, Chekiang. He was a student of military science in Japan for some time, and a history teacher and newspaper editor in Singapore, Java, and Burma. Reportedly a very bright scholar with a photographic memory, he was an excellent writer, a staunch member of the Kuang-fu hui 光復會 (Restoration Society), and a co-plotter with Hsü Hsi-lin 徐錫麟 to assassinate the Anhwei governor, En-ming 恩銘. Before the 1911 revolution erupted in Wuchang, he tried to unite the members of the Ko-lao hui 哥老會 (Elder Brother Society) in the five provinces of Chekiang, Fukien, Kiangsu, Kiangsi, and Anhwei to form a new organization called Lung-hua hui 龍華會 (Dragon China Society). This society probably incorporated the millenarian legend that the Maitreya Buddha is expected to appear and open a new era in order to attract more members to restore China. (Cf. J.J.M. DeGroot, *Sectarianism and Religious Persecution in China*. Taipei, photoreprint 1963, p. 198.)

T'ao had close connections with, and intimate knowledge of, the secret societies. Unexpectedly, he was shot to death by a political rival in a Shanghai hospital in January 1912. In the preceding year, perhaps out of frustration, he burned most of his writings except the essay *Chiao-hui yüan-liu k'ao*, which was written and published in booklet form in 1911. This booklet had a limited circulation and was rarely seen until the 1930's when it was reprinted by Hsiao I-shan in his *Chin-tai mi-mi she-hui shih-liao* 近代秘密社會史料 (Historical data of modern secret societies), Peiping, 1935 *chüan* 2, pp. 1-14, and also by Lo Erh-kang 羅爾綱 in *T'ien-ti hui wen-hsien lu* 天地會文獻錄 (Documents relating to the Heaven and Earth Society), Nanking, 1942, pp. 61-76. (Cf. the postscripts in Hsiao's work.) The present translation is based on Hsiao I-shan's version. The value of the essay as historical study was considered to be very high by both Hsiao and Lo, and it is indeed a succinct outline of the complicated and significant network of secret societies, based on the author's own fieldwork experience in enlisting their support for the 1911 revolution.

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