

Matthew Cooper
Professor Madeline Chu
Wenyanwen Research Paper

神奸秘雄: Enigmatic Villain, Unsung Hero
Cao Cao's Role in History and in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

One of the more important moments in the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is the scene in the twenty-first chapter (曹操煮酒論英雄 關公賺城斬車胄) in which Cao Cao and Liu Bei discuss the heroes of the age at the Prime Minister's garden pavilion. Liu Bei, always self-effacing, first denies he has any ability to judge a hero, but then mentions a number of people from Han Sui to Sun Ce. Cao Cao dismisses them all, ultimately replying, '今天下英雄，惟使君與操耳！' ('The heroes of the present day number but two—you, my lord, and myself!')¹. It is an important moment for a number of reasons: firstly, Cao Cao spells out the most important rivalry in the *Three Kingdoms*, between Liu Bei and himself. Secondly, it demonstrates the literary contrast between the two characters: though he is characterised as a villain, Cao Cao's ambitions are direct and he has no reservations about thinking highly of himself, whereas Liu Bei's ambitions are presented as noble and couched in the humble and self-effacing language of Confucian morality. These are the two protagonists and adversaries in the novel, though this paper is concerned primarily with the portrayal of Cao Cao, namely the discrepancies between official (and current) histories and the historical novel and a literary analysis of the character of Cao Cao as he is portrayed in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Though Luo Guanzhong and his later editor, Mao Zonggang, take definite liberties with the history in order to portray Cao Cao as Liu Bei's mirror image and a villain, Cao Cao nonetheless

¹ Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中, *Three Kingdoms: a Historical Novel* 三國演義, ed. & trans. Moss Roberts, 165. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991.

still manages to come off as a complex and interesting character in the trying world of the Later Han and the Three Kingdoms.

When Cao Cao is introduced, he is portrayed as a clever and ambitious cavalry commander with tendencies for going against the grain. He is described as a ‘man capable of bringing peace’ (‘能安之者’；‘安天下者’), but more famously by Xu Shao: ‘You could be an able statesman in a time of peace or a treacherous villain in a time of chaos’ (‘子治世之能臣，亂世之奸雄也。’)². Cao as a young man is shown to be something of a loose cannon: he brazenly opposes He Jin for wanting to bring Dong Zhuo to the capital to help get rid of the palace eunuchs, and storms off when He Jin refuses to listen³. Later, when Dong Zhuo has killed He Jin and usurped power, murdering Liu Bian and replacing him with Liu Xie as emperor, Cao Cao scorns Wang Yun and his guests for bemoaning their fate rather than taking direct action: ‘This courtful of ministers can weep all night till dawn, and weep from dawn till dusk, but can you weep Dong Zhuo to his death?’ (‘滿朝公卿，夜哭到明，明哭到夜，還能哭死董卓否?’)⁴, and thus pledges to kill Dong himself, being given Wang Yun’s jewelled sabre for the task. When he is discovered attempting to stab Dong, he makes a show of offering Wang’s sabre to Dong, fleeing under suspicion and with Chen Gong taking refuge with his uncle, Lü Boshe, who leaves his house to prepare dinner for his guests. In a misunderstanding Cao Cao kills Lü’s servants as they prepare to butcher a hog, Cao and Chen again fleeing, but they encounter Lü again on the road, and Cao stabs him. When Chen, shocked, asks him why he did it, Cao speaks the words that have made him

² Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 12.

³ Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 24.

⁴ Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 36.

infamous in Chinese popular culture: ‘寧教我負天下人，休教天下人負我’ (‘Better I should wrong the world, than that the world should wrong me!’)⁵.

The last incident, while an important moment in the novel, should not be regarded as wholly historical. Though Chen Gong’s defection with Zhang Miao from Cao Cao to Lü Bu is mentioned in the Song-era chronicle *Zizhi Tongjian*⁶, the incident with Lü Boshe is not recorded there at all. Another account in Pei Songzhi’s annotations to the *Records of Three Kingdoms* has it that Cao Cao turned down an appointment under Dong Zhuo and was fleeing homeward when he was almost robbed and kidnapped by Lü Boshe’s household, though he cut down several of Lü Boshe’s sons and escaped⁷. Even so, Cao Cao’s character here becomes interesting: if he serves as a foil to Liu Bei, it must be noted that where Liu Bei even from a young age tends to be cautious almost to the point of indecision, Cao Cao is almost reckless. He openly criticises first He Jin’s and later Wang Yun’s authority and calls for direct and immediate action against the eunuchs and Dong Zhuo. Where Liu Bei relies heavily upon his sworn brothers Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, and later upon Zhuge Liang for advice and moral support, Cao Cao is self-motivated and largely keeps his own counsel.

While Liu Bei is portrayed as the archetypal Confucian, motivated by concern for his fellow human beings (*ren* 仁) even if it means taking the more selfless course, Cao Cao’s depiction in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* seems informed by a more Daoist emphasis on *ziran* 自然 (‘nature’, literally ‘self-truth’, or *authenticity*). Even if in killing Lü Boshe he wasn’t morally *right*, Cao’s motivations for that action and his expression of them were at least *sincere* and existentially *authentic* – a distinction Mao Zonggang made

⁵ Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 38.

⁶ Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi Tongjian* 資治通鑑 15(61), 3276-3278. Taipei, Taiwan: Taiwan Classics Publishing, Ltd. 臺灣古籍出版有限公司, 2000.

⁷ Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 1008 (endnote, Roberts).

in his commentary on this passage⁸. In this respect, Cao's place as a literary figure might be somewhat analogous to that of Shakespeare's Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing*, who expressed himself thus:

'I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace; and it better fits my blood to be disdain'd of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any. In this, though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I am a *plain-dealing villain*.'⁹

It is not an entirely irrelevant historical fact that the dynasty Cao Cao founded was open, even welcoming, to the Daoist 'xuanxue' 玄學 scholars like Wang Bi 王弼 and He Yan 何晏, and the individualistic thinkers of the Qingtan movement (for example, the Zhulin 竹林七賢)¹⁰, who worked to avoid the mistakes of the dogmatic, repressive, stagnant and often extraordinarily hypocritical socio-political atmosphere that had helped cripple the Later Han¹¹.

Though Liu Bei and Cao Cao are often portrayed as being at odds, representing two entirely different kinds of people, Cao Cao shares with Liu Bei a profound respect for ability, loyalty and *sincerity*. When Cao Cao managed to defeat Lü Bu at Xiapi, Chen Gong, Lü Bu and Zhang Liao were brought before him: Chen Gong, who had defected from Cao earlier, was put to death, though Cao Cao was sorry to see him die and ordered that his family be protected. After Liu Bei reminded Cao Cao what happened to his other patrons, Ding Yuan and Dong Zhuo, Cao Cao ordered Lü Bu strangled and beheaded. Zhang Liao, though, hurled abuse at his captors – though Cao Cao was angered at first (he refrained from killing Zhang because of the advice of Liu Bei and Guan Yu), he came

⁸ Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 1008 (endnote, Roberts).

⁹ William Shakespeare, 'Much Ado About Nothing', Act I, Scene iii, lines 21-26, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, 155. Glasgow, UK: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994.

¹⁰ Ellen Johnston Laing, 'Neo-Taoism and the "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove" in Chinese Painting', *Artibus Asiae*, 36(1) (1974): 8-9.

¹¹ Laing, 'Neo-Taoism', 5-6.

Rafe de Crespigny, 'Man from the Margin: Cao Cao and the Three Kingdoms', Australian National University, <http://www.anu.edu.au/asianstudies/decrepigny/morrison51.html>.

to respect Zhang Liao's sincerity and dignity, and treated him well, eventually earning Zhang's unflinching loyalty¹².

Other, perhaps more interesting examples of this same respect for strong character underlie Cao Cao's relationships with Liu Bei and Guan Yu themselves. Liu Bei is, of course, Cao Cao's primary antagonist in the novel – but at the same time, Cao Cao esteems him so highly he is willing to name him one of the only two heroes to exist in the world. Even in this one example, Cao Cao's discussion of the heroes of the age with Liu Bei is charged with both suspicion and admiration, and Luo Guanzhong leaves it unclear whether or not Cao Cao is making a veiled threat. Certainly in describing himself and Liu Bei as heroes, Cao Cao sees Liu Bei as a danger to his goals: '夫英雄者，胸懷大志，腹有良謀，有包藏宇宙之權，吞吐天地之志者也' ('A hero [must have] a determination to conquer, a stomach for amazing schemes, the ability to encompass the world and the will to make it his own')¹³. Cao Cao's worries are to some extent borne out when Liu Bei joins Dong Cheng's aborted assassination attempt and later flees to set up his own state in Jingzhou.

With regard to Guan Yu, Cao Cao's relationship is in some ways less complex. When Cao Cao defeats Guan Yu at Xiapi and sends Zhang Liao to convince Guan Yu to surrender, Guan Yu does so under several conditions, such that he doesn't break his oath to Liu Bei. Cao Cao is continually impressed by Guan Yu's uprightness, and does not regard him with the same suspicion that he does Liu Bei: when Xun Yu opposed allowing Guan Yu to meet with his sisters-in-law unguarded, Cao Cao's reply was simply '雲長義士，必不失信' ('Yunchang [Guan Yu] is an honourable soldier, and

¹² Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 154-156.

¹³ Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 165.

would never break his word')¹⁴. Though Cao Cao favours him and treats him as an honoured guest with the intention of earning his loyalty the way he had Zhang Liao's, Guan Yu continually places a higher priority on his previous oath to Liu Bei. Though Cao Cao was understandably dismayed by Guan Yu's insistence on holding to his previous oath, the text makes it clear that he was also impressed, as he exclaims: '事主不忘其本，乃天下之義士也！' ('He follows his lord and doesn't forget his first oath; that is the mark of an honourable man in this world!')¹⁵. Later, when Guan Yu leaves Cao Cao's service to seek out Liu Bei, Cao Cao lets him leave freely¹⁶.

To some extent, all of these relationships have some grounding in historical fact: Zhang Liao did submit to Cao Cao at Xiapi and was spared where Chen Gong and Lü Bu were executed¹⁷, and afterward became one of Cao Cao's most trusted generals. Though perhaps the encounter in the garden pavilion is apocryphal, Liu Bei and Cao Cao were indeed rivals, even bitter enemies after Liu Bei collaborated with Dong Cheng¹⁸. Also, that Guan Yu joined Cao Cao for a brief period after being defeated at Xiapi is historically-based¹⁹. Though the novel does take liberties with the actual history, expanding on the antipathy traditional Confucian historiography had toward the rulers of Cao Wei in order to embellish for literary purposes the characters involved²⁰, the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* does add layers to the character of Cao Cao which do make him more interesting, and may even be seen in some lights as a 'sympathetic villain'.

Cao Cao is portrayed in the novel as both clever and treacherous, though it is hinted in Xu Shao's appraisal of his character that one of his nature would in more

¹⁴ Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 194.

¹⁵ Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 196.

¹⁶ Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 213-4.

¹⁷ Sima, *Zizhi Tongjian*, 15(62), 3383-3384.

¹⁸ Sima, *Zizhi Tongjian*, 15(63), 3415.

¹⁹ Sima, *Zizhi Tongjian*, 15(63), 3416.

²⁰ de Crespigny, 'Man from the Margin'.

peaceful times be an effective minister. In the Later Han, however, at the cusp of an era of pestilence, revolt, fragmentation and disunity, when ‘good people’ are turning to violence (like the Huangjin under Zhang Jue), and to subterfuge and back-stabbing to further their own political goals, it seems that a person with Cao Cao’s honesty must look to survival first. This with good reason! Cao Cao had seen his own attempt to attack Dong Zhuo fail, only to have Wang Yun’s daughter accomplish by intrigue what he had intended to do openly²¹. The attempts on Cao Cao’s own life begin with Ji Ping, a physician working for Dong Cheng to assassinate Cao Cao by administering poison. Ji Ping, when exposed by one of Dong Cheng’s disgruntled servants, is given multiple chances by Cao Cao to name his co-conspirators and be freed, but he refuses to talk, choosing instead to commit suicide. It seems here that Cao Cao had some respect for Ji Ping – he gave Ji Ping several chances to redeem himself – but when he learned of Dong Cheng’s involvement, he offered Dong no chances, executing his entire clan (including the Imperial high consort and her unborn child)²².

Another conspiracy on Cao Cao’s life is aborted when Ma Teng (one of Dong Cheng’s seven conspirators) and Huang Kui are betrayed by Huang Kui’s brother-in-law, Miao Ze, at the urging of one of Huang Kui’s concubines. By this time, Cao Cao has grown suspicious, however. Though he was informed of the first conspiracy by Qin Qingtong under similar circumstances (Qin was beaten and dismissed for being familiar with one of Dong Cheng’s concubines), Cao Cao protected his informant. With Miao Ze, however, it is a completely different story. When Miao Ze comes forward to ask to marry Huang Kui’s concubine, Cao Cao replies: ‘留此不義之人何用!’ (‘What use do I

²¹ Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 73, 76.

²² Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 186-189.

have for such an untrustworthy man?') and has him and his paramour put to death along with the rest of Huang Kui's clan²³.

Cao Cao grows ever more distrustful, even of his closest associates who bear him no ill will at all. He almost prevents Pang De from leading the force to rescue Cao Ren from Guan Yu at Fancheng for fear that he might defect to Shu Han, to which his former lord and friend Ma Chao and brother Pang Rou have sworn allegiance. Only when Pang De protested his loyalty to Cao Cao did he allow Pang De to continue as the leader of the rescue force²⁴. This turned out to be a wise choice on his part: Pang De shows his bravery and his loyalty to Cao Cao right up until the very end, fighting even after Yu Jin and his other soldiers had surrendered to Guan Yu. When Guan Yu even offers him a chance to surrender, Pang De refuses: '吾寧死於刀下，豈降汝耶！' ('I'll die under your blade rather than submit to you!')²⁵ and is put to death. Cao Cao, when he hears of this, is dismayed: '于禁從孤三十年，何期臨危反不如龐德也' ('Yu Jin has followed me for 30 years; yet in the face of danger he didn't measure up even to Pang De!')²⁶.

As a literary figure in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Cao Cao's honest villainy mirrors that of Shakespeare's comic villain Don John. But Cao Cao is no comic villain – it might be more fitting to compare him to Othello, as he becomes a tragic figure with a single flaw that undoes him completely in the end. Othello is undone by his romantic jealousy; Cao Cao is undone by his mistrust (even in a world so ill-suited to trust!). When Cao Cao's headaches worsen, another physician, the famed Hua Tuo, is brought in to examine him. When Hua Tuo prescribes opening Cao Cao's skull to remove the brain tumour that is causing him headaches, Cao Cao accuses him of being in league with Shu Han and trying to murder him the way Ji Ping tried to: '此人欲乘機害我，正與吉平無

²³ Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 435-436.

²⁴ Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 563-564.

²⁵ Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 567-568.

²⁶ Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 571.

昇！’ (‘The man only wants a chance to do me harm, just like Ji Ping!’)²⁷. Hua Tuo dies in prison, and Cao Cao is left untreated until he dies of the tumour.

Cao Cao, the historical figure, remains enigmatic, a kind of historical ink-blot, as treatment of him often tells more about the values and sympathies of the commentator who writes about him than it does about the man himself²⁸. In reality, though, he may have been a far more sympathetic figure than he appears in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. He was born in a time of drastic social upheaval and violence as the rotting fabric of the Han Dynasty crumbled away; the literature composed during the Jian’an period has been characterised by a kind of *carpe diem* worldview which reflected the uncertainty of the times²⁹. He was undoubtedly clever and self-motivated, as portrayed in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*: though nowhere near as prestigious as Yuan Shao was and with nowhere near as many followers, he managed to defeat the scion of the great family and bring the entirety of the northern plains under his control.

He may not have been without a sense of compassion: he instituted agricultural reforms that allowed dispossessed farmers to resettle abandoned land, an action which gave him massive popular support, and also had tactical benefits in maintaining supply lines. Even in his prodigious personal life, his favourite wife was Lady (later Empress Dowager) Bian, not from a great family, but a woman of common stock who had a career as a prostitute before marrying Cao – a radical choice of companion for someone with aspirations as high as Cao Cao’s. Though it could be the case that he favoured her because her family could not engage in the court intrigues that had plagued the Liu family

²⁷ Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 592.

²⁸ Robert Joe Cutter, ‘The Death of Empress Zhen: Fiction and Historiography in Early Mediaeval China’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 112(4) (1992): 578.

²⁹ Robert Joe Cutter, ‘Cao Zhi’s (191-232) Symposium Poems’, *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*, 6(1) (1984): 6.

(right up to the ill-fated pairing of Liu Bei and Sun Renxian)³⁰, Dr Rafe de Crespigny (historiographer of Han China at Australia National University) holds that it is not outside the realm of probability that Cao Cao genuinely loved Lady Bian. He and his sons Cao Pi (later Emperor Wei Wendi) and Cao Zhi were also highly renowned (as the *San Cao* 三曹) for their poetry, as the forerunners of the Jian'an style, their literary scholarship and their enthusiastic patronage of other talented intellectuals³¹.

But the Cao Cao that exists most prominently in the life-world of Chinese popular culture is still the Cao Cao of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the multi-faceted nemesis of Liu Bei, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei and Zhuge Liang, by turns marked by treachery and tragedy, cunning and honesty. Though Luo Guanzhong has obviously taken liberties with the history, the Cao Cao that emerges in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is nonetheless a remarkable character. Whether one views Cao Cao as an enigmatic blackguard or as an unappreciated tragic hero, it is little wonder that Luo's literary reinterpretation of Cao Cao continues to have the kind of cultural presence that it does.

³⁰ Luo, *Three Kingdoms*, 409-410.

³¹ de Crespigny, 'Man from the Margin'.