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**The Place of Classical Chinese Literature in Modern Sino-Japanese Pop
Culture: The Case of Cao Cao in *Sanguo Yanyi***

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for College
Honors

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Introduction

Although China's Three Kingdoms period only lasted for 60 years, from 220 CE to 280 CE, its complex plots, shifting alliances, brilliant strategies and engaging characters have earned it a prominent place in East Asian culture. Throughout the centuries following the fall of the Han dynasty, hundreds, if not thousands, of plays, folk songs and poems were written to celebrate the glorious heroes and chastise the dastardly villains of this time period. In modern times the story has been adapted numerous times into movies, TV shows, videogames and comic books.

However, the most famous, and probably the most important interpretation of this story is Luo Guanzhong's 14th century novel 三国演义 (*Sanguo Yanyi*), normally translated into English as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. In his novel, Luo draws upon both the official Jin Dynasty history of the period, Chen Shou's 三国志 (*Sanguozhi*) or *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, and the many folk dramas and songs that formed the public consciousness of the story to create a work that is equal parts fact, fiction and fantasy. This novel quickly became the most popular work about the Three Kingdoms period, and its popularity spread throughout East Asia to Korea, Vietnam and Japan. It has been said that *Sanguo Yanyi* is as important in East Asia as the works of Shakespeare are in the West.¹

Sanguo Yanyi is especially well known for its complex characters with complicated motivations. However, perhaps the most complex, and indeed, the most controversial character in the novel is Cao Cao. Although he started his career as a rather low level official and general, he eventually worked his way up to Prime Minister through a series of brilliant decisions and

¹ Kaori, Shoji. "War as Wisdom and Gore." *The Japan Times*. November 6, 2008. Accessed February 28, 2015. http://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2008/11/06/films/war-as-wisdom-and-gore/#.VP8USvzF_Tp

lucky breaks, and became the real power behind the throne. His son, Cao Pi, deposed the last Han emperor and founded the Wei dynasty, posthumously naming Cao Cao its first emperor.

Sanguo Yanyi is not the only work that describes the events of the Three Kingdoms period. Another way to see how Cao Cao is interpreted in East Asia is to look at the multifarious other adaptations, many of them based on *Sanguo Yanyi* itself. That is what this paper aims to do, and in doing so follows in the vein of Paul Cohen's *Speaking to History: The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth Century China*, in which he uses adaptations and interpretations of an ancient Chinese story in modern times to examine underlying Chinese cultural attitudes at various points in history.² The main question to ask here is: how is Cao Cao interpreted different in Chinese and Japanese adaptations of *Sanguo Yanyi*, and what can be learned from these different interpretations? Although there is a lot of shared history, culture, and language here, there are also huge differences. The focal point of these differences is as follows.

Towards the beginning of *Sanguo Yanyi*, when Cao Cao is first introduced, Luo Guanzhong relates a story from his childhood. In his hometown there was a sage by the name of Xu Shao, who was said to be particularly skilled at predicting the fortunes of young people. Delighted by this idea, Cao Cao visited the man, but he refused to tell him anything. It was only after Cao Cao entreated him several times that he laid Cao Cao's character out for the world to see. He said that Cao Cao would be “治世之能臣， 乱世之奸雄” (zhishi zhi nengchen, luanshi zhi jianxiong). This is usually translated as “a capable official in times of peace, a villainous hero in times of chaos.” Cao Cao, it should be noted, was mightily pleased with this pronouncement.

² Paul Cohen, *Speaking to History: The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth Century China*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010).

“Villainous hero” almost perfectly describes Cao Cao’s demeanor in the chaotic times of *Sanguo Yanyi*. He is at once a violent, grasping usurper and a generous, loyal peacemaker. Of course, in this case, hero does not mean good, so much as great. But villainous certainly means evil. When describing Cao Cao’s death, Luo Guanzhong has ghosts of some of the people that Cao Cao killed haunt him and, in general, Cao Cao’s death seems very much like that of a fairytale villain. Thus, although he is portrayed as a very complex character in *Sanguo Yanyi*, Cao Cao is still clearly a complex villain.

The reasons for this negative portrayal are many and complex. The official records of the Three Kingdoms period were compiled by Chen Shou during the Jin dynasty. In his book *Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155-220 AD*, Rafe De Crespigny argues that since Chen Shou had been born in Liu Bei’s kingdom of Shu, he was biased against Cao Cao and that was reflected in his work.³ Of course, since the Jin dynasty was formed out of the abdication of the Wei dynasty, Cao Cao’s regime had to be portrayed as legitimate in order for the Jin dynasty to also be legitimate. Thus, while Chen Shou portrays Cao Cao in a more positive light than does *Sanguo Yanyi*, it is still probably an unfair portrayal.

Other explanations have less to do with Cao Cao himself and more to do with Liu Bei and his state of Shu. After the fall of the Jin dynasty, there was a period of several hundred years that did not see a strong unified China. During this time, there were many non-Chinese dynasties formed in Northern China, and there were Chinese dynasties that opposed them in the South and in the West. Moss Roberts argues in the appendix to his translation of *Sanguo Yanyi* that many of

³ Rafe De Crespigny, *Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao, 155-220 AD* (Boston: Brill, 2010).

these embattled Chinese rulers identified with Liu Bei's struggle to maintain the Han dynasty, especially since many of them ruled over what had been Liu Bei's state of Shu.⁴

As for adaptations of the story, there are two clear paths that the adapters can take with regards to Cao Cao's character. They can focus on his "villainous" aspects, or his "heroic" ones. Since *Sanguo Yanyi* is so long, with so many characters and complex characterizations, the only adaptations that can really reflect the true complexity of Cao Cao's character are those massive complete reproductions, such as Chinese TV shows like *Three Kingdoms* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. This is not to say other adaptations that take a more simplistic view of Cao Cao's character are lacking in any respect; these adaptations simply have other focuses and they could not possibly put all of the information within *Sanguo Yanyi* into their chosen formats, so some sacrifices have to be made.

With that being said, it seems that most of the adaptations made in China seem to focus on Cao Cao's villainous side, whereas those made in Japan tend to focus on his heroic side. This is by no means a hard and fast rule, as there are many outliers, and almost all portrayals of Cao Cao contain some level of complexity and ambiguity, but the overall emphases are markedly different in Chinese and Japanese adaptations. Briefly, some the reasons for that include different relationships with the concept of the Emperor, differences in media forms, and his opposal of the righteous hero Liu Bei, all of which will be detailed further in the interpretive conclusions section of this paper. The following sections will analyze how two of Cao Cao's main characteristics, namely his ambition and his respect for men of talent, are represented in various

⁴ Luo Guanzhong, *三国演义 (Sanguo Yanyi)*, trans. Moss Roberts. (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2001), 2256.

Chinese and Japanese adaptations, but first it is necessary to have an overview of Cao Cao's role in the novel *Sanguo Yanyi*.

Cao Cao in *Sanguo Yanyi*-An Overview

Despite the fact that he is one of the central characters, Cao Cao's story in *Sanguo Yanyi* does not begin until chapter four. After the chaos of the Yellow Turban Rebellion, the group of imperial eunuchs known as the Ten Attendants who are in de facto control of the Han empire become more and more blatant in their abuses of power. This culminates in their assassination of the Empress's brother, General He Jin. Enraged, another general by the name of Yuan Shao leads his troops into the palace in order to kill the eunuchs. However, two of the Ten Attendants manage to kidnap the child Emperor and his brother and escape. While fleeing, the two eunuchs are killed by soldiers, and the children are rescued by the warlord Dong Zhuo, who had been called to the capital by He Jin in order to help purge the eunuchs.

Once Dong Zhuo brings the Emperor and his brother, the Prince of Chenliu, back to the capital, he promptly takes control of the government. He deposes the emperor and puts the Prince of Chenliu on the throne instead, even going so far as to have the deposed emperor and his mother murdered.

It is here that Cao Cao makes his debut in the story. An official by the name of Wang Yun gathers his friends for a banquet and makes a tearful plea for someone to put an end to the tyrant Dong Zhuo's reign and restore the power of the emperor. Everyone at the banquet is moved to tears, except for Cao Cao, who responds by laughing and rubbing his hands together.

After the banquet, Cao Cao agrees to assassinate Dong Zhuo. However, his attempt fails and he is forced to flee the city.

While fleeing, he and a companion take refuge with a friend of the Cao family and decide to stay there until the morning. However, Cao Cao's friend leaves to get wine and Cao Cao hears voices from the other room and knives being sharpened, and, fearing that they have been betrayed, the two men burst into the room that the noises came from and kill all therein. They then discover that the people they had killed were servants preparing to carve up a pig to serve to them. They flee into the night, but along the road they run into the head of the household who had been in town buying wine for the feast. Cao Cao slays the man, and when his horrified companion asks why, he says that if the man had returned home and seen what they had done he would have certainly alerted the authorities. It is here that Cao Cao speaks the line that will shape his character for the rest of the novel: "Better to wrong the world than have it wrong me!"⁵

Cao Cao returns home and forges an imperial decree calling on all those loyal to Han to raise troops to overthrow Dong Zhuo. Many come, including most of the eventual important characters in the novel, and a huge force under the command of Yuan Shao sets out to retake the capital. They succeed in defeating Dong Zhuo's army, but before they can reach Luoyang, Dong Zhuo burns the city to the ground and moves the Imperial Court to Chang'an.

Thus begins a long period of relative autonomy for the various lords and generals, with Dong Zhuo still in control of the emperor. During this time Cao Cao wins great renown fighting Yellow Turban remnants and builds up a huge army made up of his surrendered enemies.

⁵ Luo Guanzhong, *三国演义*.

Dong Zhuo is eventually killed by one of his generals, and, when two of his other generals attempt to flee with the emperor, Cao Cao defeats them and rescues the emperor. Now in de facto control of the emperor, Cao Cao moves north and defeats his main rival, Yuan Shao, taking control of the entire North China Plain. During this time Cao Cao is made Prime Minister and eventually King of Wei, and is the most powerful man in the empire.

Cao Cao then moves south, hoping to defeat his last two powerful enemies, Sun Quan of Wu and Liu Bei, the closest person to a main character in *Sanguo Yanyi*. However, due to a combination of overconfidence and the amazing tactics of his enemies, Cao Cao is disastrously defeated at the battle of Red Cliff, only escaping with his life due to one of Liu Bei's generals repaying a kindness that Cao Cao had done for him. He is forced to retreat back to the capital, and the empire stabilizes into the titular Three Kingdoms. Cao Cao reigns in the north in the state of Wei, which, since the Han emperor resides there, is technically the remainder of the Han dynasty. Sun Quan rules the southern kingdom of Wu and acts as a balance between the other two powers. And Liu Bei takes the west as his territory, in the kingdom of Shu, and since he is a distant relative of the imperial family, he makes it his mission to restore the Han to their former glory.

For the rest of his life Cao Cao continues to grow in power, watch the former allies Sun Quan and Liu Bei turn on each other, and bring various other small warlords under his control, but he eventually dies of a brain tumor. His son, Cao Pi, forces the Han emperor to abdicate to him, founding the Wei dynasty and posthumously naming Cao Cao as founder and first Emperor. This prompts first Liu Bei and then Sun Quan to also declare themselves emperor. This tripartite division lasts for many years until Wei finally conquers Shu in 263 and relegates its emperor, Liu

Shan, to a minor, powerless position. However, shortly afterwards, Sima Yan, whose family had served the Cao family as advisors for many years, forces the last Wei emperor, Cao Huan, to abdicate to him and founds the Jin dynasty. Finally, in 280, the last Wu emperor Sun Hao is defeated, leading to a China that is unified (albeit briefly) under the Jin dynasty and the end of the Three Kingdoms period.

Although *Sanguo Yanyi* purports to be a historical novel, and in many aspects it is, much of the information contained within it is biased or even completely fictional. The reasons for this will be discussed later. Perhaps the biggest change to Cao Cao's narrative is the story of his murder of the family friend who sheltered him when he was on the run. In real life, this never happened. It seems that this story may have been inserted merely to demonstrate Cao Cao's villainous and expedient nature. Thus, we cannot look to *Sanguo Yanyi* as a historical document that can tell us what kind of person Cao Cao actually was. However, since *Sanguo Yanyi* is in large part based on folk songs and plays that dramatize the events of the era, we can look at it as a piece of culture that can give us some insight into the way that people of that time viewed Cao Cao. In the same way, we can look at modern adaptations of the novel to see how certain aspects of his character, such as his ambition, are interpreted by people in China and Japan today.

The Ambition of Cao Cao in Chinese Adaptations

Probably the most important, and most controversial, aspect of Cao Cao's character was his ambition. It is difficult to say how much the historical Cao Cao wanted power. He himself wrote a poem in which he compared himself to Huan, Duke of Qi and Wen, Duke of Jin, two men who had essentially controlled the empires that they lived in, and yet respected Imperial

sovereignty.⁶ On the other hand, leaders such as Liu Bei regarded him as a usurper who had essentially stolen the throne and cast the Han into ruin. In any case, it is important to note that Cao Cao never declared himself Emperor, whereas his two main rivals, Liu Bei and Sun Quan, both did (he was eventually posthumously declared Emperor by his son). Of course, it may be that he had no need to do so as he already controlled the royal court.

It is the interpretation of this trait, more than any other, that shapes how the creator of an adaptation portrays Cao Cao. But it is not as simple as it sounds. Because while on the surface “was Cao Cao’s ambition justified/righteous/defensible?” seems like an easy question to answer, in actuality we can probably never know the answer. On the one hand, Cao Cao, the adopted grandson of a court eunuch with no royal connections, came to absolute power in a series of conflicts that left thousands dead. But on the other hand, Cao Cao’s consolidation of power and the rise of the Three Kingdoms stabilized a country that had been plagued by rebellion, civil war and banditry for many years, and paved the way for eventual reunification. This was no mean feat, as by the time the Jin dynasty came to power, everyone who had lived during a time of a unified, competent Han Empire had already died. Thus, Cao Cao’s so-called usurpation of power managed to reverse the chaotic trend of unravelling that had gripped China for decades. Luo Guanzhong makes the argument that it was not so much Cao Cao’s contributions as much as the inevitability of dynastic cycles that led to reunification. He opens *Sanguo Yanyi* with the lines “The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide.”⁷ He ends the novel with the reversal: “The empire, long united must divide, and long divided, must unite.”⁸

⁶ Jean-Pierre Diény, *Les Poèmes de Cao Cao* (Collège de France: Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 2000), 57.

⁷ Luo Guanzhong, *三国演义*, trans. Moss Roberts. (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2001), 1.

⁸ *三国演义*, 2175.

And indeed, Luo is not very forgiving of Cao Cao's ambitions. When talking to Liu Bei about the heroes of the realm, Cao Cao says: "what defines a hero is this: a determination to conquer, a mine of marvelous schemes, an ability to encompass the realm, and the will to make it his."⁹ When asked who would merit such a description, Cao Cao replies by pointing to himself and Liu Bei. Clearly Luo saw Cao Cao as almost predatorily seeking to swallow the Han empire whole.

John Woo's *Red Cliff*

Luo's view is echoed in many adaptations. In John Woo's 2008 epic film *Red Cliff*, Cao Cao is unquestionably the villain of the piece, and it is his ambition that makes him so. This villainous ambition is showcased in many aspects, from dialogue to cinematography.

The film opens in the Imperial Palace, with the young emperor innocently playing with a bird that has flown in. The camera focuses through the Emperor's eyes onto the bird that has perched on his finger, and then, with a dread-inducing swell of the orchestra, the bird flies off, and the audience can see Cao Cao standing there menacingly, and the Emperor is instantly cowed.

This scene perfectly encapsulates Cao Cao's character throughout the film. His power is obvious in that his very presence can intimidate Emperors and even frighten off wildlife. And it is very clear that this is not noble power. Both the Emperor and the bird seem to be young and innocent, and thus Cao Cao's fearsome presence is in direct contrast to that. Cao Cao proceeds to bully the emperor into authorizing a punitive expedition against those that he labels rebellious warlords, namely Liu Bei and Sun Quan. However, judging by the expressions of those present,

⁹ 三国演义, 355.

the real threat to the throne is Cao Cao. This is confirmed when one of the assembled senators speaks up in defiance of Cao Cao, saying: “Liu Bei is your majesty’s uncle, and Sun Quan is the third generation heir to the dukedom of Wu, they have no intent to rebel. Whereas you, Prime Minister, are not only seizing all the powers of state, but also intend to mobilize the entire army. There is no justifiable reason for you war...the next one to put down a rebellion may not be you, Prime Minister, but Liu Bei and Sun Quan!”¹⁰ While one might think that this is merely the opinion of one disgruntled senator, there is no refutation of his accusations, and, in fact, Cao Cao executes him to keep him quiet.

Of course, up until this point the evidence that Cao Cao's ambitions are purely out of self-interest comes merely from dialogue and cinematography. But once Cao Cao's rampage in the South begins, the screen fills with expository writing, which refers to Cao Cao's service to the Han court as “Ambitious Cao Cao seizes the moment to control the emperor and coerce the feudal lords.”¹¹ Whereas many other adaptations would at least mention the fact that Cao Cao had brought stability to war torn northern China, *Red Cliff* jumps right to accusations of power seizure. And since this background information is meant to inform any watchers who might be unfamiliar with the story, the fact that Cao Cao's ambition is evil is taken for granted.

The violence of Cao Cao's ambitions is so obvious that even the common folk, who are certainly not privy to the inner machinations of the Han court and the warlords, can see it. When Cao Cao launches his invasion, thousands of civilians flee with Liu Bei. So many, in fact, that it delays Liu's escape and allows Cao Cao to catch his army. When asked why he is risking everything for a bunch of peasants, Liu Bei replies, “These are Han people. They followed us

¹⁰ *Red Cliff*. Directed by John Woo. Dallas: Magnolia Pictures, 2008.

¹¹ *Red Cliff*

only to escape from Cao Cao's regime!"¹² It is important to note that these people have lived through a lot of warlords. Violence and destruction are nothing new to them, yet the promise of Cao Cao's domination is the thing that forces them to leave their homes. This implies that Cao Cao's supposed peace and order would somehow be worse than the uncertainty and warfare they will certainly find with Liu Bei.

Then again, it could just be that the citizens are fleeing from the predations of Cao Cao's army. During the entire opening battle in which Liu Bei's armies are pushed back by Cao Cao's, Cao Cao's men are shown indiscriminately killing civilians. While this sort of behavior is not necessarily uncommon for armies in wartime, this is a marked difference from Cao Cao's policies in *Sanguo Yanyi*, where he threatens to have his men killed if they so much as pick some farmer's grain. Contrast that to Zhuge Liang's statement when visiting the Southlands: "The Southlands really are heaven on Earth. Unfortunately, with the arrival of Cao Cao's regime, all of this beauty will soon turn to ash."¹³ In *Red Cliff*, Cao Cao's rule will destroy the very landscape.

Another sign that in *Red Cliff* Cao Cao's ambition is evil is the fact that fighting against Cao Cao is so important that many people dedicate their lives to stopping him. Even though Liu Bei has suffered a lifetime of defeats against Cao Cao, and even though both of his wives had just barely been killed by Cao Cao's soldiers, Liu Bei says, "Cao Cao thinks he holds the dynasty's fate in his hands. So long as I live and breathe, I will fight to end his crimes against the Han court."¹⁴ Despite all the hardship and loss that he has suffered, stopping Cao Cao's ambitions is so important that Liu Bei will soldier on.

¹² *Red Cliff*

¹³ *Red Cliff*

¹⁴ *Red Cliff*

Likewise, when Zhuge Liang travels to the Southlands to form an alliance with Sun Quan, many of Sun Quan's advisers counter that it would be far more moral to surrender and spare the people the suffering of war. However, Zhuge Liang reinforces the film's message that Cao Cao's ambitions need to be opposed by saying, "Cao Cao, the self proclaimed Prime Minister, controls the Han emperor and fabricates his majesty's commands. If he conquers the Southlands, he will surely usurp the throne. If we surrender to Cao Cao, then we would be aiding a tyrant."¹⁵ Here, Zhuge Liang refutes any claim that Cao Cao has made to being a servant of the Han empire, and brands him a traitor and a tyrant.

Even Cao Cao himself realizes that his war in the south has no moral or legal basis. Of course, when forcing the emperor to give him his blessing to make war on Sun Quan and Liu Bei he refers to them as traitors and warlords. However, when informed of the possibility of his actions forcing them into an alliance, he is overjoyed, saying, "If Sun Quan forms an alliance with Liu Bei then he is justifying our war by harboring a traitor."¹⁶ This implies that even Cao Cao knows that their war is not justified on its own merits.

Red Cliff does give a nod to more forgiving views of Cao Cao's ambitions, but uses this as a way to highlight how corrupt he has become. The film makes a big deal about an aspect of Cao Cao's invasion that was only briefly touched upon in *Sanguo Yanyi*, the fact that part of the reason he launched this invasion was in order to take the famed beauty Xiao Qiao as his wife. Xiao Qiao is the wife of Zhou Yu, the commander of Sun Quan's forces, and in *Red Cliff* Cao Cao hopes to kill Zhou Yu and take Xiao Qiao as his own. Thus, in an effort to distract Cao Cao to delay his attack long enough for the allies to launch their own attack, Xiao Qiao goes over to

¹⁵ *Red Cliff*

¹⁶ *Red Cliff*

Cao Cao's camp. While there, she refers to Cao Cao's more heroic past, saying, "At that time Cao Cao believed in justice, ideals, and loyalty to the Han throne. He was a young hero."¹⁷ Cao Cao laughs and asks how else he could have become Prime Minister, to which Xiao Qiao replies, "by killing many people."¹⁸ The heroism of young Cao Cao is used to highlight just how self-serving and destructive his ambitions have become.

And, of course, when Cao Cao is defeated at the end, the fiery bloody battlefield scene is switched out for an idyllic grassy field in which the main characters can say their farewells. This happy ending is interesting because it implies much more stability and finality after the Battle of Red Cliffs than what happened in reality. While in *Red Cliff* the characters do hint at the fact that they may become enemies in the future, they say that they will always be friends. In *Sanguo Yanyi*, the rivalry between Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu became so bitter that Zhuge Liang's schemes frustrated Zhou Yu so much that he became sick and died, and Liu Bei nearly destroyed his fledgling kingdom in an effort to destroy Sun Quan in revenge for the death of Guan Yu. But, while in *Sanguo Yanyi* the three rulers are mutually distrustful and all have their own good points and flaws, in *Red Cliff* Cao Cao is the greatest evil, and the bonds that were formed in fighting against him will last a lifetime.

Chen Shou's *The Ravages of Times*

Another work that portrays ambitions in a negative light, albeit not as negatively as in *Red Cliff*, is Chen Shou's manhua *The Ravages of Time*. Interestingly, the storyline follows that of *Sanguo Yanyi* fairly closely, but many of the character interpretations are wildly different. This is mostly in the form of characters having much more complicated motivations than they do

¹⁷ *Red Cliff*

¹⁸ *Red Cliff*

in *Sanguo Yanyi*. For example, Dong Zhuo, who is almost universally portrayed as a greedy tyrant who cared for nothing more than his own power, is an almost Mao Zedong-like character, blaming the ills of the land on the noble class and calling for violent revolution in order to bring about a new order.

However, as different as characters' motivations and characteristics may be, their basic morality remains unchanged. For example, in *Sanguo Yanyi* Lu Bu is a peerless warrior, but he is not very smart and completely lacks cunning. In *The Ravages of Time*, Lu Bu is a masterful strategist as well as a fearsome warrior, and his reputation as an artless thug is merely the slander of his enemies. However, in both *Sanguo Yanyi* and *The Ravages of Time* Lu Bu is disloyal and corrupt, willing to turn on his master if the slightest opportunity for personal advancement is presented. Similarly, Zhang Fei, who in *Sanguo Yanyi* is also portrayed as a hotheaded, if extremely loyal, buffoon, is shown to be very cultured and a crafty strategist, but his extreme sense of honor and loyalty to Liu Bei is preserved.

Likewise, Cao Cao, although he seems to start on his path of war out of a desire to ease the people's suffering, becomes little more than a vicious conqueror. Doubts about Cao Cao's altruism are apparent from the start. When a great master tells his students that the only two great leaders who care about the people's wellbeing are Sun Jian and Cao Cao, one of his students responds: "There are many able men in this world. How could our master deduce that there could only be two lords?"¹⁹ This is clearly a rhetorical question, as the master does not answer. The implication here is clear. Cao Cao is no different from the myriad "able men" that currently fight for dominance in China. And the appellation "able men" is not necessarily flattering. Chen Mou

¹⁹ Chan Mou, *The Ravages of Time*, (Hong Kong: Tong Li Comics, 2001), volume 6, chapter 43, page 24.

makes a clear distinction between talent and morality, with the implication that the so-called “heroes” of the age are tearing China apart. Thus, in this manhua, Cao Cao, from the start, is just another warlord with selfish ambitions.

One of the main themes in this work, as in many other adaptations, is the people’s desire for a hero to step forth and end the chaos and violence that has gripped the land. Many possible candidates are put forth, Dong Zhuo, Lu Bu, Yuan Shao, Liu Bei, and Cao Cao being just some of them. However, while some of the people in this manhua may look at Cao Cao as a savior, the author certainly does not. At one point, one of Cao Cao’s chief strategists, Guo Jia, has his life saved by the famous doctor Hua Tuo. When he asks him why he saved him, Hua replies: “I’m waiting for the day you turn Cao Cao into Qin Shi Huang, which goes against my principle of saving lives, but I foresee an awakening of peace and happiness.”²⁰ While Hua Tuo sees the many deaths that would certainly come about due to Cao Cao’s rise to power as a necessary evil, the comparison with Qin Shi Huang clearly casts Cao Cao in a villainous light. Qin Shi Huang was the first emperor of the Qin dynasty, who united a China that had been divided for hundreds of years and established control through brutal and repressive means.

For some people, Qin Shi Huang’s tyrannical reign was necessary to unify the warring states and was in any case preferable to the constant warfare that had come before. Not so for Chan Mou. He shows his feelings towards Qin Shi Huang when another wise old man again compares him to Cao Cao. In this case, however, the old man is begging Cao Cao to act *as* Qin Shi Huang and end the chaos. However, one of Cao Cao’s generals bluntly replies: If our Ah-Man (Cao Cao) became Qin Shi Huang, such a cruel dictatorship would just plunge the

²⁰ *The Ravages of Time*. 10:81,14.

nation towards destruction again.”²¹ Cao Cao, of course, rather likes the comparison and eventually decides to pursue a path of destruction.

This is not to say that Cao Cao’s ambitions come from selfish motives or glory-seeking. He appears to truly want to bring peace to the country. However, the way that he goes about doing it is portrayed in a very negative light in the manhua. He states his philosophy thusly: ““No conquerors have ever attained their goals without bloodying their hands. Even the most humane must employ violence to defeat their enemies. War is cruel and violent. Behind every leader's victories and defeats are countless deaths of innocent soldiers. Killing is killing. What difference about killing neatly or justly? Tyrants and liberators all have killed. There is no difference between them.”²² In fact, Cao Cao pushes this to its limits, as will be seen below.

Cao Cao’s father, Cao Song, was murdered by an officer sworn to the governor Tao Qian. In real life, it seems likely that Tao Qian was directly responsible for the attack,²³ whereas in *Sanguo Yanyi* the officer in question is a former Yellow Turban rebel and Tao Qian has no notion that he would do such a thing. In both cases, Cao Cao launches a brutal attack on Tao Qian’s lands and it is only a timely invasion by Lu Bu’s forces that saves Tao Qian’s life. In *The Ravages of Time*, however, Cao Song had died of natural causes, and Cao Cao spreads a rumor that Tao Qian had him killed to use as a pretext to take over Tao Qian’s lands.

As if this was not villainous enough, Cao Cao adopts his advisor’s strategy, known as “the Dark Art of War,” which is to “massacre one city to frighten ten into submission.”²⁴ Of course, some people look at this as a wise and altogether more peaceful decision on the whole, as

²¹ *The Ravages of Time*, 10:85,12.

²² *The Ravages of Time*, 10:85,14.

²³ Rafe De Crespigny, *Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao, 155-220 AD* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 71.

²⁴ *The Ravages of Time*, 10:85,25.

the total number of casualties will be far lower if the other ten cities surrender, as Cao Cao's supporters put it, "There is a thin line between good and evil; right now some will see the fearful unrest. Some will see the peace after the brutality."²⁵ However, even Cao Cao himself can see that that is a very weak rationalization. When he finally accepts his adviser's proposal, he says, "I have decided to go to war, so why should I fear bloodshed? Fourth genius Guo Jia, you will accompany me to hell!"²⁶ Although Cao Cao obviously thinks that what he is doing is necessary, he knows that it is morally reprehensible and he feels that he will deserve to be punished for it.

Other characters also condemn Cao Cao's ambitions and see him as a villain because of them. When trying to persuade Liu Bei to come to Tao Qian's aid, the strategist Mi Zhu says, "Now if you, the Imperial Uncle, would personally lead a campaign against Cao Cao, the rest of the righteous world would follow!"²⁷ This suggests that most people are in agreement that Cao Cao's actions are despicable and that his ambition is too destructive, and they are merely waiting for someone to lead them. Liu Bei repeats the idea that Cao Cao's actions may be working towards the greater good, but his sworn brother Zhang Fei angrily responds, "Killing is killing! There is no theory behind it!"²⁸

Although one could make the argument that Zhang Fei and Cao Cao's viewpoints are both equally supported in *The Ravages of Time*, this is not the case. In a short question and answer page between chapters, the author reveals that he gives some of the villains grand motivations and seemingly sound philosophies in order to make the story more interesting and to reflect the moral ambiguity of the Three Kingdoms period. However, he says that they still

²⁵ *The Ravages of Time*, 10:85,25.

²⁶ *The Ravages of Time*, 10:85,22.

²⁷ *The Ravages of Time*, 11:86,10.

²⁸ *The Ravages of Time*, 11:86,11.

definitely are villains and that “anybody who starts a war is a bad person anyway.”²⁹ Although in this case he is talking about Dong Zhuo, the sentiment clearly applies to Cao Cao. Although he has grand ambitions to bring peace and unify the country, in the end all they will bring is war and destruction.

Cao Cao’s Ambition in Japanese Adaptations

Yokoyama Mitsuteru’s *Sangokushi*

In some works, however, Luo Guanzhong’s negative views of Cao Cao’s ambition are subverted, if not outright rejected. A good example would be Yokoyama Mitsuteru’s manga, *Sangokushi* (Records of the Three Kingdoms). This manga is directly based on Eiji Yoshikawa’s translation of *Sanguo Yanyi*, which is the premier Japanese translation of the work. For the most part, this manga follows the story of *Sanguo Yanyi* quite closely, with few variations in terms of events. However, since it is in manga form, the story is told almost entirely through dialogue and pictures, with very little narration, which is a large contrast to the narration heavy *Sanguo Yanyi*. Thus, some of the emphases and portrayals of characters come across as very different from the original novel. Perhaps the most egregious example of this would be Cao Cao.

It is clear from Cao Cao’s first introduction that Yokoyama’s portrayal of Cao Cao will be more positive than that of Guanzhong. The banquet in which Wang Yun bemoans the evils of Dong Zhuo’s reign plays out exactly as it does in *Sanguo Yanyi*, but after Cao Cao has accepted the task of assassinating Dong Zhuo, he is formally introduced by the narration: “And so, a gallant youth stepped forth to undertake the plan to assassinate Dong Zhuo. His name, Cao Cao!

²⁹ *The Ravages of Time*, 4:32.29.

Some say that he was the true main character of Romance of the Three Kingdoms.”³⁰ The first reference that the manga’s omniscient narrator makes to Cao Cao contains not one, but two pieces of high praise. The first, calling him a “gallant youth” may not seem like it is more than just a comment on his willingness to assassinate Dong Zhuo, but it is important to note that Cao Cao is the only “villainous” character in *Sangokushi* that is also considered brave. For example, the Ten Eunuchs never leave the palace and are constantly running to the Dowager Empress to save them, and Dong Zhuo loses battle after battle to the Yellow Turbans and has to be saved by Liu Bei and his army of volunteers.

The second piece of praise offered here is more telling still. While it does not by itself necessarily condone Cao Cao’s actions, naming him as a potential main character of not only *Sangokushi*, but of *Sanguo Yanyi* itself certainly gives them a sense of legitimacy. As the main character, it is the things that he does that drive the narrative more than anyone else. And this certainly holds up when one examines *Sanguo Yanyi*: Cao Cao bringing the Emperor under his protection causes Liu Bei and others to desire to restore the Han dynasty to its former glory, Cao Cao launching an attack on the kingdom of Wu prompts the at once triumphant and tragic alliance between Liu Bei and Sun Quan, and the list goes on and on.

However, while Cao Cao might be the main character of *Sangokushi*, Liu Bei very much seems to be the hero. As in most adaptations, he is portrayed as wise, competent and morally pure. And of course after their initial alliances against Yuan Shu and Lu Bu, he is diametrically opposed to Cao Cao and his ambition. But while Liu Bei is certainly a great hero of *Sangokushi*, he is not necessarily the *greatest*. When Cao Cao draws up his forged imperial decree calling for

³⁰ Mitsuteru Yokoyama, *Sangokushi* (三国志), (Tokyo: Ushio Shuppansha, 1971), Volume 4, 133.

loyal servants of the Han to rise up against the tyrant Dong Zhuo, the narration states: “A man cannot become a hero solely due to his talents or character, it is said that he must be blessed with three things before anything, Cao Cao's manifesto had called upon those three things. Those three things are time, place and the people's will.”³¹ This concept that an ambitious hero such as Cao Cao was what the fractured and chaotic China of the time needed is supported by other statements within *Sangokushi*, and is a theme that is reflected in other adaptations of *Sanguo Yanyi*.

When Cao Cao and Chen Gong mistakenly murder Cao Cao's friend who had taken them in, Chen Gong ponders slaying Cao Cao as he sleeps. He convinces himself that Cao Cao is a monster and that the world would be better off without him, but when he draws his sword to strike, he finds that he cannot do it, saying: “looking at his determination and daring boldness, it is true that he is no ordinary man...perhaps it is heaven's will that such a man was born in this age.”³² While Cao Cao is certainly not a morally pure character in this work, it is clear that he is at the very least a necessary evil. The chaos and destruction can only be brought to order by one such as Cao Cao who has the ruthlessness and influence to bend the world to his will.

This sentiment is echoed many times throughout the manga. When Cao Cao's pursuit of Dong Zhuo's fleeing army after the burning of Luoyang leads to his crushing defeat, many of his officers sacrifice their lives specifically to save Cao Cao, saying things such as, “The world can do without me, but not without you sir”³³ and “The world needs a man like you now more than ever.”³⁴ It is clear from their statements that they recognize the vital role that Cao Cao will play

³¹ *Sangokushi*, vol. 4, 203

³² *Sangokushi*, vol. 4, 190

³³ *Sangokushi*, vol 6, 8

³⁴ *Sangokushi*, vol 6, 23

in the eventual reunification of China, and they are willing to sacrifice their lives to see Cao Cao's ambitions fulfilled. In this light, Cao Cao's desire for power cannot be seen as selfish, as its ultimate goal is to restore the peace and stability that the land so desperately needs.

This is further emphasized when Cao Cao laments the almost complete annihilation of his forces, and his cousin, Cao Hong, replies: "as long as sir is still alive, we still have hope rising once more. These men shed their tears of joy for that very reason."³⁵ Although in this context Cao Hong himself may be speaking specifically of Cao Cao's army, it is very clear that this statement is meant to be taken as a metaphor for China as a whole. The chaos and destruction rampant throughout the land is equivalent to the destruction of Cao Cao's army, but the fact that Cao Cao is still alive means that there is hope for the country.

And this is not just the mantle of savior being thrust upon a man who is already ambitious and seeks the reunification of China for his own nefarious ends. Seeing the dedication of his men to him and realizing the dire need that the people of the country are in, he vows to learn from his defeat and says: "Oh heavens! Send to me as many trials and hardships as you want for I swear to overcome them and become a hero, villainous or not."³⁶ With this challenge Cao Cao, who had during his retreat (and several times earlier in the manga) given himself up for lost when things seemed hopeless, realizes that he is fighting for something greater than himself and declares that he must overcome all hardships, as he has a noble task to complete.

The Dynasty Warriors 8 Video Game

³⁵ *Sangokushi*, vol. 6, 41

³⁶ *Sangokushi*, vol. 6, 42

Another Japanese work that takes a decidedly positive view of Cao Cao's ambitions is the video game *Dynasty Warriors 8*. In this game, the player can take on the role of one of the many heroes of the Three Kingdoms period and fight in some of the most famous battles therein. One can play as characters from Wei, Cao Cao's kingdom, Wu, Sun Quan's kingdom, Shu, Liu Bei's kingdom, or Jin, the dynasty founded by the Sima clan many years after the death of Cao Cao. Each storyline presents the events of the novel from the point of view of the faction the player is using. Another interesting feature is that presence of "what if?" scenarios, in which ahistorical events take place, for example, Cao Cao defeating Liu Bei and Sun Quan and unifying China within his lifetime. These provide some of the best insights into what the developers thought were Cao Cao's goals.

The nobility of Cao Cao's ambition in *Dynasty Warriors 8* is revealed most clearly in a scene in which he is talking to Emperor Xian. The Emperor is at first hostile to Cao Cao, insinuating that he is no better than Dong Zhuo or the other warlords who sought to control the Emperor and thus control the throne. But Cao Cao replies: "Our desires drive us, our hearts drive us forward. Uncontrolled, this leads to chaos. The current state of the land is a testament to this. I believe that we are capable of better. Desires can be controlled with strength, ruled with reason. Order can be restored."³⁷ Cao Cao makes it clear that he does not desire power for power's sake, but instead seeks to rid the land of disorder and offer a peaceful life to its citizens.

The events of the game bear this out. The common folk are constantly shown to be in danger from Yellow Turbans or warlords, and the destruction wrought by the constant warring is clearly a present and life-threatening danger to the people of the land. At one point, when Cao

³⁷ *Dynasty Warriors 8* (PS3 Version). Developer: Omega Force/Publisher: Tecmo Koei, 2013.

Cao and his entourage enter a village, they are attacked by a group of peasants who believe that he is just another marauding warlord. After defeating the leader, Cao Cao, recognizing what a powerful warrior he is, convinces him to join them by merely stating his intentions for his rule, saying: “Join our cause. Fight to end this chaos, and to make the land rich and fertile once more.”

³⁸ This, of course, causes the starving peasants to cheer for him and joyfully join his cause. Throughout the game, Cao Cao ambitions are never portrayed as a selfish lust for power; they are always couched in the language of saving the people and bringing peace and prosperity to the land.

The argument, of course, could be made that Cao Cao is at least partly responsible for the widespread destruction that was visited upon China, and that his ambitions are thus somewhat tainted by the bloodshed that they entail. Cao Cao, and indeed, the developers of the game, do not see it that way. Cao Cao sees his way of violence as the only way to bring about peace, stating: “To bring a swift end to this conflict-that is the role of one who walks the path of the conqueror.”³⁹ Cao Cao can see that the seemingly endless cycle of violence that had been unleashed first by the Yellow Turbans and then by Dong Zhuo can only be ended by the use of more violence, specifically, the conquest and subjugation of all of the other agents stirring up trouble.

As for why Cao Cao must destroy his opponents in order to bring peace, rather than simply working together with them to form a more cohesive government, Cao Cao simply does not believe that they are up to the task. His words about Yuan Shao, perhaps his most powerful opponent, exemplify this: “If the 'noble' Yuan Shao has the Emperor under his control, he will

³⁸ *Dynasty Warriors 8*

³⁹ *Dynasty Warriors 8*

use his name to make a move. But he does not have what it takes to quell the chaos. Gain the authority of the Emperor, rally my forces, and create a new order; that is my path, and the path to ruling this land.”⁴⁰ Cao Cao sees himself as the only one who can bring peace, and any other contenders for power are simply adding to the disorder and thus must be put down.

While Cao Cao’s theories about violence and power may not be true in real life, in the game they are born out. When playing as Wei, the player eventually defeats Liu Bei and unifies China under Cao Cao. This is followed by a glowing speech by the emperor and a parade in front of cheering crowds. It then cuts to a scene in which Cao Cao and his son, Cao Pi ride by newly fertile farmlands being farmed happily by some of his generals alongside peasants. As Cao Cao gazes over the peace and prosperity that he has brought to the land he says to his son: “Oh how brightly does humanity shine. This brilliance is the legacy that I leave”⁴¹ before literally riding off into the sunset. He not only saved the land from chaos and war but he claims to have literally brought the goodness back to humanity. And the imagery of smiling happy commoners and generals working together in the field shows that he completely justified in doing so. It is abundantly clear that in this game Cao Cao’s ambitions were the best thing for the Han Empire, and that Cao Cao himself is a savior to China.

Cao Cao’s and Men of Talent in Japanese Adaptations

Perhaps the most positively portrayed attribute of Cao Cao in *Sanguo Yanyi* is his respect for and pursuit of men of talent. This is a theme of many characters in *Sanguo Yanyi*, and, indeed, in a lot of East Asian literature. But Cao Cao takes it to a whole new level. Much of the

⁴⁰ *Dynasty Warriors 8*

⁴¹ *Dynasty Warriors 8*

beginning of Cao Cao's storyline in *Sanguo Yanyi* deals with him finding and employing talented warriors, such as Xu Chu and Dian Wei. Also, more than any other leader besides Liu Bei, the exploits of Cao Cao's subordinates are glorified: notably Xiahou Dun taking an arrow in the eye and then plucking it out and eating it due to a sudden burst of filial piety.

Of course, many of the other characters spend a lot of time finding and rewarding their generals throughout the course of the novel, after all, the relationship between master and subordinate is an important issue in Confucian ethics. What makes Cao Cao unique is the sheer lengths that he goes to in order to attract powerful and virtuous warriors to his cause and to reward them when they succeed. When his most trusted advisor, Guo Jia, died, Cao Cao made a direct request to the Emperor for him to be buried with honor.⁴²

But the most famous example of Cao Cao's pursuit of talented warriors would have to be his relationship with Guan Yu. In *Sanguo Yanyi*, Guan Yu is the quintessential righteous warrior. His prowess in battle was so renowned that he was officially declared to be a god of war, and he is still revered even today. Not only was he a masterful warrior, his loyalty and honor were unparalleled. At the beginning of the novel he swears an oath of brotherhood with Liu Bei and Zhang Fei and he sticks to that oath through thick and thin.

Cao Cao, of course, greatly desires to have such a man as his retainer. He finally gets his chance after defeating Liu Bei in battle. Guan Yu is trapped with his army and surrounded by Cao Cao's men, and, since he has been tasked with protecting Liu Bei's wives and son, surrenders to Cao Cao after he promises that they will be well treated. Cao Cao attempts to woo Guan Yu over to his side by presenting him with lavish gifts and feasts, but although Guan Yu is

⁴² Luo Guanzhong, *三国演义*, trans. Moss Roberts. (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2001), 612.

grateful, he refuses to break his oath to Liu Bei. When he finally learns the whereabouts of Liu Bei, he promptly leaves Cao Cao's army to return. Although Cao Cao's advisers urge him to have Guan Yu killed, after all, having such a dangerous man serving his enemy is a great threat to his power, Cao Cao lets him go, admiring his loyalty and courage all the more.

Mitsuteru Yokoyama's *Sangokushi*

Many adaptations place a lot of emphasis on this side of Cao Cao's character. In this section the Japanese sources will be presented first, as they more closely align to Cao Cao's depiction in *Sanguo Yanyi*. One example is the Japanese manga *Sangokushi*, which was discussed previously. Particular attention is placed on the aforementioned part where Cao Cao seeks to win Guan Yu's loyalty. When Cao Cao sends out his officer Zhang Liao to bargain for Guan Yu's surrender, he says: "I have long admired Guan Yu and his prowess as a warrior. If possible, I'd like to capture him and make him my subordinate."⁴³ Far from seeking revenge on the warrior who has killed so many of his men, or trying to remove his greatest enemy's most valuable asset, Cao Cao, ever the pragmatist, seeks to woo him to his side. This is important because Cao Cao's vengeful nature had already been demonstrated earlier in the story. When his father, Cao Song, died at the hands of some of Governor Tao Qian's former Yellow Turban soldiers, Cao Cao furiously declared war on Tao Qian and threw his troops into a pointless and costly campaign out of a desire for revenge.

Cao's trend of sparing potential threats if he believes that they can further his aims is also well established. At one point, after retaking a city that had previously fallen, he comes across a pair of officials who had previously betrayed him and let the city fall to Liu Bei. Although the

⁴³ *Sangokushi*, vol. 17, 81.

custom at the time would have been to execute them, as so many generals had done before him, Cao Cao instead says: “I really should have your heads for betraying me...but I'd rather not since you two can still be of use to me.”⁴⁴ Since they are well liked in the city, and are talented administrators, Cao Cao desires to use their influence to ensure a peaceful transition of power. Cao Cao is not one to let personal grudges interfere with his pursuit of talented retainers.

However, this is not to say that Cao Cao's pursuit of talented warriors and advisors is done purely out of a practical desire to strengthen his army and further his own ambitions, Cao Cao legitimately admires heroes and seeks to surround himself with people of moral worth. When Guan Yu surrenders to Cao Cao, one of his three stipulations is that he will be surrendering to the Han emperor, and not to Cao Cao directly. Instead of being outraged or indignant with this slight, Cao Cao is delighted and says: “He's definitely as great a man as I had expected him to be. I admire his patriotism in submitting to Han and not to me.”⁴⁵ Cao Cao is clearly a very proud man, after all, he had himself declared Prime Minister. But despite this, he is still able to appreciate the nobility of Guan Yu's actions, even though they are a direct attack on the pride he has in his position.

Of course, it could just be that Cao Cao is very patient and Guan Yu has not yet tested him to his limit. After all, in order to obtain the services of as great a warrior as Guan Yu, it might be necessary to make some sacrifices, pride included. But later events make it clear that this is not the case. Cao Cao tries to win Guan Yu over by presenting him with many gifts, including gold, fine clothes, and Red Hare, said to be the fastest horse in the world. However, although Guan Yu cannot refuse the gifts, he instead presents them to Liu Bei's wives, so as to

⁴⁴ *Sangokushi*, vol. 17, 77

⁴⁵ *Sangokushi*, vol. 17, 110

not be in Cao Cao's debt (except for Red Hare, which he says will allow him to find Liu Bei even faster). Although initially frustrated with Guan Yu's comments on Red Hare, when he hears what Guan Yu has done he says "So he gave away all of my gifts to Liu Bei's wife? Such modesty he possesses! It makes me desire him even more."⁴⁶ This is important because it shows that Cao Cao is not just interested in Guan Yu for his prowess as warrior, or even because of his steadfast loyalty. Admiring Guan Yu's modesty shows that Cao Cao is clearly interested in the basic moral character of the men under his command. This paints him less as an opportunistic schemer who is merely trying to expand his power base, and more as a righteous hegemon who wants to build a new order based on morality and virtue.

And Cao Cao's desire to obtain Guan Yu's services is not merely a passing fancy. As mentioned before, he gives Guan Yu the fastest horse in the world. As some of his men put it "Our master sure thinks the world of Guan Yu, doesn't he? It's almost as if he were courting a beautiful lady."⁴⁷ And indeed, the steps that Cao Cao takes go above and beyond merely trying. He does literally everything in his power, short of using threats of force, to compel Guan Yu to renounce his allegiance to Liu Bei and join him.

The fact that he does not try to threaten Guan Yu into serving him is also interesting. Cao Cao, in every adaptation, has never been above using violence and threats to get what he wants. One could perhaps argue that he fears Guan Yu's martial ability, but if Guan Yu were dangerous enough to pose a threat to Cao Cao while alone in a camp full of enemies, he never would have surrendered in the first place. Instead, it seems that since Guan Yu is such a righteous person, Cao Cao knows that it would be better for him if Guan Yu were to choose to serve him of his

⁴⁶ *Sangokushi*, vol. 17, 139

⁴⁷ *Sangokushi*, vol. 17, 116

own volition (helped along by gifts and generosity, of course). This suggests that in this adaptation Cao Cao sees himself as a righteous character, one who is worthy of the voluntary service of one so esteemed as Guan Yu.

Any doubt that Cao Cao admires Guan Yu mainly for his moral character is dispelled when some of his councilors question the wisdom of devoting so much time, energy and resources to persuading a man who clearly does not want to be persuaded. Cao Cao responds “If he is so dishonorable as to break his word, then he is not the warrior that I desire.”⁴⁸ It is clear from this that Cao Cao believes that skill-at-arms is secondary to righteousness. This says a lot about the kind of state that Cao Cao is trying to create. In a chaotic world in which might is the only arbiter of right, this viewpoint is not only unusual, it is deadly. Liu Bei has almost died numerous times because of his insistence on always doing the right thing, and numerous other characters have met their ends because they would not get their hands dirty whereas others were all too happy to. Cao Cao obviously knows this. He has in fact benefited from such misguided morality on several occasions, so the fact that he still seeks out such men shows that his plan for the empire is one of healing and restoration, and not simply of gathering more power for himself.

The final test of Cao Cao’s generosity comes when Guan Yu finally learns where Liu Bei is. Since he has already killed two of Yuan Shao’s greatest generals for Cao Cao, he considers his debt for Cao Cao’s hospitality repaid, and he seeks the Prime Minister’s leave to go seek out his blood-brother. Cao Cao, acting on the advice of one of his ministers, pretends to be away, and hopes to keep Guan Yu from leaving until he has seen Cao Cao, thus allowing enough time for Liu Bei to disappear again. However, for Guan Yu loyalty and oaths are more important than

⁴⁸ *Sangokushi*, vol. 17, 116

courtesy and so, taking only Red Hare and Liu Bei's wives with him, he leaves in secret. Cao Cao's advisers and generals are triumphant. Since Guan Yu snuck out without leave, that makes him a traitor and a deserter, and thus he should be hunted down and executed. But Cao Cao will hear none of it. "Silence!" he says, "I made my three promises with Guan Yu at the very start. If I turn my back on my word now, what would the world think of me?"⁴⁹ Even though letting Guan Yu go back to Liu Bei is letting one of his enemies regain his most powerful warrior, the promise that Cao Cao made to Guan Yu is more important to him than that extremely important tactical consideration. This is the same Cao Cao who declared that it is better to betray the world than to have it betray him! Although the argument could be made that these are slightly different situations, it stands to reason that this shows some real character development on Cao Cao's part.

While character development is common throughout the novel, it is almost always in the negative direction. After Liu Bei's brothers Guan Yu and Zhang Fei are killed by Wu forces, Liu Bei transforms from a benevolent, moral ruler to a rage-fueled avenger bent on the complete destruction of Wu, and spends the rest of his life pursuing a pointless and destructive war that nearly destroys his kingdom. Yuan Shao begins the novel as a decisive young hero who rids the kingdom of the Ten Attendants and leads the alliance against Dong Zhuo, but by the end of his life he is an indecisive old man, unable to strike powerfully enough to destroy Cao Cao's far weaker forces, and in the end unable to prevent his sons from launching a war of succession that ultimately destroys their house. Cao Cao, on the other hand, goes from being an ambitious young man willing to do whatever it takes to succeed in his, admittedly noble (at least in *Sangokushi*),

⁴⁹ *Sangokushi*. vol. 18, 64

goal of bringing peace and stability to the land, to a more mature leader, who places great importance on the value of his word and who seeks out righteousness both in himself and others.

This character development makes a strong case for Cao Cao as the main character of *Sangokushi*. Of course, it is hard to pinpoint a main character, as by the time the novel ends, all of the characters who were alive at the start have been dead for decades, but it is Cao Cao who really drives the most important events of the manga, especially the formation of the titular three kingdoms, and, since he is one of the few, and probably the only important, characters to exhibit positive character development, he is, at the very least, no worse than the majority of leaders in the novel.

And it is not just Guan Yu that Cao Cao respects and treats well. After his crushing defeat at the Battle of Red Cliffs, Cao Cao gathers his generals and advisors together and says: “It is good to see all of you alive and well. Our great loss at Red Cliffs was entirely due to my negligence. I beg for your forgiveness and give my deepest apologies to those who passed away in battle.”⁵⁰ Whereas your stereotypical villain would be blaming everyone else and maybe executing a few subordinates for good measure, Cao Cao takes all the blame upon himself and even asks for their forgiveness. It is clear that Cao Cao respect and admiration for the men under him is not feigned, and permeates every aspect of his rule. He realizes that he could not be where he is without his men, and treats them accordingly. With such an attitude, it is not surprising at all that so many noble and able men would flock to the banner of one who is traditionally looked at as the villain of *Sanguo Yanyi*, and why he manages to retain their services.

⁵⁰ *Sangokushi*, vol. 26, 187

The *Dynasty Warriors 8* Video Game

Another Japanese adaptation that takes Cao Cao's respect for men of talent at face value is the video game *Dynasty Warriors 8*, which was previously mentioned. A large aspect of this game is playing as the subordinates of the various leaders vying for power in 2nd and 3rd century China. Therefore, every storyline pays at least some attention to the relationship between master and subordinate, and, since each faction is more or less portrayed as the righteous one in its own storyline, these interactions, for the most part, place the interactions in a good light.

But whereas the other leaders' respect for the men and women under their command is mostly incidental (after all, almost anyone would respect the prowess of a mighty warrior and try to keep them happy), for Cao Cao it is one of the defining aspects of his character. This is epitomized in the hypothetical Wei victory scenario. In this, Cao Cao successfully defeats Liu Bei and Sun Quan and re-unifies China. He leads his main generals through the streets of the capital city in a joyous parade. The emperor greets them personally and, looking at the force that Cao Cao has arrayed behind him, says: "These brave warriors. They are your strength, aren't they, Cao Cao?" to which Cao Cao replies: "My strength, and my treasure. Therefore, as you are my master, they are your strength and your treasure as well."⁵¹ Here, both Cao Cao and the emperor are affirming the theme, present throughout *Sanguo Yanyi* and many of its adaptations, that it is necessary for any successful leader to have the backing of both powerful warriors and talented advisors. And the way that this is stated, "they are your strength," not "one of your strengths," implies that these followers are the reason that Cao Cao succeeded where others failed.

⁵¹ *Dynasty Warriors 8*

Compare this to the hypothetical Liu Bei victory scene in which the rhetoric focuses entirely on vaguely defined benevolence and peace. Of course, the relationship between Liu Bei and his sworn brothers Guan Yu and Zhang Fei is always prominently displayed, but other than that Liu Bei is not shown as particularly close to the rest of his generals. This is not to say that he is at all portrayed as the villain, or that he is cold and distant towards them, but Cao Cao is definitely considered to be the more appreciative boss. And this makes sense given their characters: Liu Bei is an imperial relative who has lain claim to the throne and thus believes it is his by divine right and destiny, whereas Cao Cao is the adopted grandson of a eunuch and thus owes much of his success to the talented people who serve him, and, to his credit, he clearly recognizes this.

Cao Cao's main story begins, like it does in the novel, with the ascendancy of Dong Zhuo and Cao Cao's attempt to assassinate him. After this, the story moves on to Cao Cao more or less wandering the countryside gathering powerful warriors to his cause. This is interesting because, while this is a very important part of *Sanguo Yanyi*, it is usually glossed over or even outright ignored in most adaptations. But in *Dynasty Warriors 8*, it takes up a large portion of the beginning of the game. Thus, the first impression that we get of Cao Cao in this game, besides that fact that he wants to get rid of the tyrant Dong Zhuo, is that he values men of talent and actively seeks them out. And indeed, at the beginning of the game Cao Cao obtains some of his most famous warriors such as Dian Wei and Xu Chu, and his best strategists, namely Jia Xiang and Guo Jia.

Cao Cao is also shown to be suitably appreciative of his men's talents, and is not shy about attributing his many successes to the warriors under his command. After victory in one

battle, instead of praising himself or even praising fate or heaven, as many of the other commanders do, Cao Cao instead praises his soldiers, saying “I offer up my my deepest respect to the bravery and acuity shown by each and every one of you.”⁵² Whereas someone like Liu Bei would have thanked heaven for granting him his victory, or Sun Quan may have commented on the rising fortunes of the state of Wu, Cao Cao instead drapes the mantle of victory around the soldiers of the brave generals and strategists that he so admires and knows that he cannot do without.

Cao Cao and Men of Talent in Chinese Adaptations

Guan Yunchang's Righteous and Brave Refusal of Gold

In contrast, many Chinese adaptations portray Cao Cao's relationship with the men under his command in a much more cynical light. The works mentioned here are different from the Chinese works in the section about ambition because they focus more heavily on Cao Cao's relationship with the men under his command, whereas in the previous Chinese adaptations this aspect is not so important. The play *Guan Yunchang's Righteous and Brave Refusal of Gold* by a member of the Ming imperial family named Zhu Youdun in the 15th century. This play was actually written at around the same time as *Sanguo Yanyi*, or possibly before it so it is likely that this is one of the plays that *Sanguo Yanyi* based off of. Although this play is significantly older than any of the other sources mentioned, according to Wilt H. Idema and Stephen H. West it has still been very popular in China throughout the centuries following.⁵³ It deals entirely with the

⁵² *Dynasty Warriors* 8

⁵³ Zhu, Youdun, *Guan Yunchang's Righteous and Brave Refusal of Gold. Battles Betrayals and Brotherhood: Early Chinese Plays of the Three Kingdoms*, eds. Wilt L. Idema and Steven H. West. (Indianapolis: Hacket Publishing Company, 2012).

period of time that Guan Yu spent in the employ of Cao Cao, and presents in a different light than does *Sangokushi*.

The play's less than positive views towards Cao Cao are spelled out right in the beginning. When Guan Yu is giving a brief overview of the events leading up to his capture, he refers to Cao Cao as "that crafty and treacherous Cao Man!"^{54 55} From the start it is clear that Guan Yu, although he is extremely grateful to Cao Cao for the favor that he has shown him, does not trust Cao Cao and thinks that he is a villain.

Guan Yu's negative view of Cao Cao is further reinforced later in the play when Liu Bei's wife, the Lady Gan, asks him why he does not simply kill Cao Cao and flee to rejoin Liu Bei, he replies, "If a real hero acts, he does so with great fanfare, clearly for all to see like the sun and the moon! How could I be a fellow who commits a murder in secret and flees for asylum somewhere?"⁵⁶ From this we can see that Guan Yu clearly does not consider killing Cao Cao in and of itself to be immoral; it is simply that fact that it would have to be done in secret that would be shameful. It is important to note that in this play Guan Yu is unmistakably an upright character, as it is his "righteous and brave refusal of gold" that acts as the play's moral center. Thus, if he thinks that killing Cao Cao would be the right thing to do, just under certain circumstances, then, according to the play this must be true.

The play, of course, makes a lot of references to Cao Cao's supposed respect for men of talent and his generosity to those under his command. Many of Cao's generals such as Zhang Liao and Xiahou Dun praise Cao Cao's warmth towards his men. Guan Yu has a much more cynical view of the matter, saying, "I think that if Lord Cao cultivates men of worth, it's to

⁵⁴ Cao Man is short for Cao Ahman, which is Cao Cao's courtesy name, as Guan Yunchang is Guan Yu's.

⁵⁵ *Guan Yunchang's Righteous and Brave Refusal of Gold*, 116.

⁵⁶ *Guan Yunchang's Righteous and Brave Refusal of Gold*, 117.

capture bandits and chase robbers away!”⁵⁷ Thus, although Guan Yu does not necessarily think that Cao Cao’s pursuit of talented warriors is a bad thing, after all, defeating bandits and robbers is certainly a benefit to the realm, he certainly does not see it as the Confucian mutuality that many of Cao Cao’s generals, and indeed, many of the other adaptations, do.

Guan Yu gets a chance to directly refute one of Cao Cao’s generals’ praise of his master at a later point. When Zhang Liao presents Guan Yu with Cao Cao’s gifts of gold and beautiful serving maids, Guan Yu, as the play’s title suggests, righteously and bravely refuses them. Guan Yu clearly sees that the only reason Cao Cao is giving him these things is so that he will feel indebted to him and stay in his service. Zhang Liao tries to persuade Guan Yu of Cao Cao’s benevolence, saying “He recognizes and promotes exceptional talents, pays no heed to base status or poor background; if his troops have yet to eat, he will not speak of hunger; if his troops have to bivouac, he will not retire to his tent. He treats his officers like his trusted friends, shares good and bad with conscript troops.”⁵⁸ This sounds more like the Cao Cao that is found in *Sanguo Yanyi* and in many other adaptations. But Guan Yu is having none of it. He replies, “You only want to wag your three-inch pointed tongue, its devilish skill, and loquaciously natter on about black and yellow.”⁵⁹ Although Zhang Liao’s words seem to be common consensus, Guan Yu, the hero of the story, dismisses them out of hand and more or less accuses Zhang Liao of being a liar. It is clear that Guan Yu is contemptuous of Cao Cao’s reputation.

The story of the giving of gifts in and of itself is a little bit different than in the version shown in *Sanguo Yanyi* and in many adaptations. In both versions, Cao Cao presents gold, fine clothes and serving maids, and in both versions Guan Yu returns all of these things to Cao Cao

⁵⁷ *Guan Yunchang’s Righteous and Brave Refusal of Gold*, 119.

⁵⁸ *Guan Yunchang’s Righteous and Brave Refusal of Gold*, 119.

⁵⁹ *Guan Yunchang’s Righteous and Brave Refusal of Gold*, 120.

when he leaves. However, in *Sanguo Yanyi*, Cao Cao also gives Guan Yu the famous horse Red Hare, which is the only present that Guan Yu keeps. However, in this play Red Hare is simply referred to as Guan Yu's horse during one of the battles, and Cao Cao even asks about it, heavily implying that Cao Cao did not in fact give it to him. In *Sanguo Yanyi*, Cao Cao's gift of Red Hare is presented as a great sacrifice that shows just how much he really appreciates Guan Yu, and, since Guan Yu keeps it, it seems to be the only gift that had actual worth. Thus, by removing this gift from Cao Cao's offering, it is taking away any value implied therein. After all, Cao Cao has all the gold and servants that anyone could want, so him presenting them to Guan Yu does not really mean anything. Only the gift of Red Hare, the fastest horse in the world, was irreplaceable.

Of course, Cao Cao is redeemed a little bit at the end. When Guan Yu leaves and his men suggest that he stop him, Cao Cao refuses, saying, "If he wants to leave and join Liu Bei, that only means that "each man serves his own ruler." He is a loyal and straightforward man. How could I bring injury to him?"⁶⁰ In *Sanguo Yanyi* this is interpreted as Cao Cao's supreme respect for Guan Yu's loyalty. However, in *Guan Yunchang's Righteous and Brave Refusal of Gold*, Guan Yu sees it not as admiration, but fear. When Lady Gan expresses fear that Cao Cao will try to stop them, Guan Yu replies, "Even though he may be a crafty brave of some insight, he definitely dare not kill me."⁶¹ Guan Yu is definitely justified in placing so much confidence in his abilities, as earlier in the play he rode straight into an enemy army and singlehandedly slew their general. But the doubt that he casts on Cao Cao's motives seems to suggest that the

⁶⁰ *Guan Yunchang's Righteous and Brave Refusal of Gold*, 139.

⁶¹ *Guan Yunchang's Righteous and Brave Refusal of Gold*, 141.

commonly held opinion that Cao Cao respects men of talent is merely people misinterpreting the facts.

Immediately after this, Guan Yu launches into a diatribe in which he lambasts Cao Cao, as well as the other warlords seeking to profit off of the chaotic situation in China, saying, “relying on wisdom and power they collect eminent talents; feigning love and righteousness they win the people’s hearts. Each displays his heroic valor, his martial excellence: in confusing chaos they occupy the land and scheme for highest achievement, exactly resembling the buzzing swarms of flies that vie for blood.”⁶² Although this can refer to many warlords, it seems particularly pointed at Cao Cao for several reasons. Firstly, there is the obvious fact that it is Cao Cao whom they were just speaking of. Secondly, he refers specifically to “collecting eminent talents” and “scheming for the highest achievement,” which, the editor asserts, means “founding a new dynasty.”⁶³

This referral to Cao Cao’s generosity as “feigning love and righteousness” echoes his earlier proscriptions about Cao Cao and removes all possibility of Cao Cao coming off as a heroic or even kind character in this play. Naming him one of the “buzzing swarms of flies that vie for blood” just adds insult to injury.

At the end of play, Cao Cao’s general Xiahou Dun, of his own volition, tries to prevent Guan Yu from leaving. Guan Yu, of course, easily defeats him, and gives him a message for Cao Cao that contains one final parting blow. In the message, he thanks Cao Cao for his generosity and further says, “Who is willing to establish unwavering loyalty and straight rectitude? There’s not one who is pure like ice, unblemished like jade! I repeatedly implore Lord Cao to ponder

⁶² *Guan Yunchang’s Righteous and Brave Refusal of Gold*, 141.

⁶³ *Guan Yunchang’s Righteous and Brave Refusal of Gold*, 141.

these matters. May he listen to these words of loyalty and honesty and honor the imperial house-don't overstep the bounds of your office!"⁶⁴ As the editor notes, Guan Yu is in a tricky position as Cao Cao has not technically usurped authority, thus, accusing him of treason would be tantamount to treason of his own. Therefore, Guan Yu resorts to a kind of backhanded insult: in warning him to respect his boundaries Guan Yu is implying that he has already overstepped them!

The main point of this play's portrayal of Cao Cao seems to be that his generosity is purely for self-serving ends, and therefore is not righteous. Guan Yu sees right through his plans and, while he is clearly legitimately thankful to Cao Cao for the wonderful treatment he receives, he knows that as a righteous man he must refuse the gifts and return to Liu Bei. One could even liken the scene to the temptation of Jesus by Satan in the desert, which would certainly fit the given characters, as Guan Yu was revered as a god of war and Cao Cao became a quintessential villain. All in all, Zhu Youdun seems to be saying that Cao Cao can give all the gifts and respect and admiration in the world, and that still will not make him any less of a usurper.

The *Three Kingdoms RPG* Television Series

Another adaptation that rejects the idea that Cao Cao could be good to his men is the Hong Kong TV series *Three Kingdoms RPG*. Although this show is from Hong Kong, one of the main themes is that *Sanguo Yanyi* is an integral part of Chinese culture and therefore should be learned by the youth of Hong Kong, so the people who made the show clearly consider this aspect of Chinese culture to include them too. This show follows the adventures of Sima

⁶⁴ *Guan Yunchang's Righteous and Brave Refusal of Gold*, 150.

Wan-shun, a young man from modern Hong Kong who gets sent back in time to the Three Kingdoms period. He eventually becomes a sort of junior advisor to Liu Bei, and thus the story is largely told from the perspective of the Liu camp.

Thus, in this adaptation Cao Cao is clearly the villain (with eyebrows to match!). Far from the ambiguity that characterizes the struggle in some adaptations, *Three Kingdoms RPG* presents the conflict as cut and dry case of right versus wrong. Liu Bei is the noble, rightful emperor and Cao Cao is the vicious usurper bent on bringing China under his sole domination.

Of course, this is not a unique stance for an adaptation to take, but *Three Kingdoms RPG*, like some other Chinese adaptations, finds little to nothing good in Cao Cao's character. Even his respect for men of talent, which in many adaptations is at least his one redeeming characteristic, is utterly rejected. Whereas in Liu Bei's army there is great camaraderie and loyalty, in Cao Cao's there is mistrust and backstabbing. This is not to say that there are no problems in Liu Bei's army, but these always get worked out by the end of the episode, whereas in Cao Cao's army such issues are the norm.

The prime example of this comes directly after his army, led by his general Xiahou Dun, is crushed by Liu Bei's forces under the brilliant strategist Zhuge Liang. After the battle, Liu Bei's camp is filled with rejoicing, and the show makes a point of emphasizing how good Liu Bei is to his men. Zhuge Liang says, "Master, you care for you subordinates' safety. It is our good fortune that we're your subordinates."⁶⁵ At Cao Cao's residence, Xiahou Dun offers his head as payment for his failure to win. Cao Cao draws his sword, but instead of taking Xiahou's life he instead cuts the bonds around his wrists and says that he still remembers the many

⁶⁵ *Three Kingdoms RPG*. TV Show. Produced by Lau Kar-ho. 2012. Hong Kong: TVB

victories that he has won for him. So far, this is exactly how it plays out in *Sanguo Yanyi*. But as soon as Xiahou Dun leaves the room, Cao Cao's true nature comes out. In a rage, he slices a table in half, saying, "losers are disposable."⁶⁶ He reveals that the real reason that he did not execute Xiahou Dun was not out of respect for the past services that he had done him, but instead because the Xiahou family is very influential in the army, and he did not want to cause unrest. He then muses that someone must be made an example of to discourage further losses, and, furthering demonstrating his expedient attitude towards his men, he has two of Xiahou's subordinates executed for failing to provide sufficient council to Xiahou Dun, even though these two men had warned him against the very actions that got him defeated.

The juxtaposition between these two reactions could not be more obvious. Whereas in most adaptations Liu Bei's attractiveness as a master comes mostly from the righteousness of his cause, in *Three Kingdoms RPG* he has almost co-opted Cao Cao's role as the generous superior. In contrast, any generosity that Cao Cao shows is merely propaganda meant to keep order within his army and attract talented warriors to help further his ambitions. Furthermore, the show goes out of its way to acknowledge that there is this idea of Cao Cao as a generous benefactor, as it has him at first forgiving Xiahou Dun for his failure, but then it provides its own unflattering explanation as for why someone as despicable, in their eyes, as Cao Cao would be so forgiving.

In fact, Cao Cao is not only harsh on failure, he does not even respect his men's success and loyalty when it is given. Later in the show, the main character, Sima Wan-shun is forced to flee Liu Bei's camp because of slander from Liu Bei's ally Sun Quan and his general Zhou Yu. He is captured by Cao Cao's soldiers and is forced to work for him. While there he advises Cao

⁶⁶ *Three Kingdoms RPG*.

Cao to link his ships together by chains so as to prevent his men, who were unused to water warfare, from getting seasick. Although this seems like a good strategy, Sima is using the famous “chain-link plot” that Cao Cao used in real life that made his ships extremely vulnerable to Zhou Yu’s fire ships, and that ultimately cost him the battle of Red Cliff. During the ensuing defeat and chaos, Cao Cao and one of his other advisers, a villain throughout the series who had left been kicked out of Liu Bei’s service for trying to kill Zhuge Liang out of jealousy, are fleeing the enemy. Although this adviser had provided Cao Cao with much good advice and was responsible for some of his successes, Cao Cao callously uses him to shield himself from an arrow, and then leaves him to die. Whereas in many other adaptations Cao Cao is heartbroken when his men die defending him, in this one he does not even care.

But Cao Cao’s terrible relationship with his men is not limited to being unappreciative and callous. No, in this adaptation he literally has a detrimental effect on their moral character. In *Sanguo Yanyi*, despite the fact that he is the villain, Cao Cao has many warriors of great moral worth. Fighters such as Dian Wei are renowned for their nobility, and his general Zhang Liao was even a good friend of Guan Yu. But in *Three Kingdoms RPG*, the very act of being Cao Cao’s subordinate changes a man.

After Zhuge Liang’s decisive victory over Cao Cao, it is discovered that one of the prisoners taken is one of Cao Cao’s generals, who had disguised himself as a common soldier. This general, named Ying Suen, was known to both Guan Yu and Zhang Fei. He had previously been under the command of Sun Jian (Sun Quan’s father), and had saved the life of Guan Yu and his men. However, he had gone over to Cao Cao, and after a victory in battle had buried many of Zhang Fei’s troops alive. Thus, Zhang Fei is adamant that he be executed, while Guan Yu is

adamant that he be spared. Zhang Fei invokes Cao Cao's corrupting nature when trying to convince Guan Yu to let him be executed, saying, "Whatever kindness he did for you, that was more than ten years ago. He's no longer that Ying Suen. He has gone over to Tso Cho (Cao Cao). He buried hundreds of my men alive!"⁶⁷ Although the evil that comes from joining Cao Cao is well known enough that Zhang Fei can casually mention it and assume that Guan Yu will take it for granted, Guan Yu persists in his defense of Ying Suen.

However, the wisest character in *Three Kingdoms RPG*, Zhuge Liang, also believes that joining Cao Cao corrupts warriors, and thus, he comes up with a clever plan to expose Ying Suen's new evil nature to Guan Yu. He suggests that they let the soldiers vote on Ying Suen's fate. Since the vile acts happened much more recently than the good ones, the soldiers vote to execute him, as Zhuge Liang knew they would. When Guan Yu, honorable warrior that he is, goes to visit Ying Suen and apologize to him, Zhuge Liang plants a fake dagger in the jail cell, which Ying Suen uses to take Guan Yu hostage and threatens to kill him if they don't let him go. When he tries to use the dagger on Guan Yu and it breaks, Guan Yu finally sees who he has become, and he says, "Ying Suen was a general in Tso Cho's (Cao Cao's) army. He hid his identity and pretended to be a soldier after the capture. He clung so hard to life. He's a coward."

⁶⁸ Guan Yu finally realizes what was obvious to all of the other characters: once you have joined Cao Cao, you lose all of your good characteristics.

Interpretive Conclusions

⁶⁷ *Three Kingdoms RPG*.

⁶⁸ *Three Kingdoms RPG*.

These are but a few examples out of many, but the trends are clear. It seems that many Chinese writers and directors focus on the villainous side of Cao Cao's character, whereas many Japanese filmmakers and authors focus on the heroic side. Chinese and Japanese culture were both influenced by many of the same things, from religions like Buddhism to philosophies like Confucianism. So why does one find such different feelings about such an important character?

Part of the reason clearly lies in the mediums that are being looked at. Many Chinese adaptations of *Sanguo Yanyi* are movies or plays, whereas many Japanese adaptations are comic books, videogames and TV shows. These latter forms of entertainment are much longer than movies and plays, and thus can develop more time to character development and moral ambiguity. A movie or play rarely lasts longer than two hours, and spending too much time on making the villain less villainous simply takes time away from the action or the drama of the other, "good" main characters, especially in an adaptations where Cao Cao is not the main focus. By contrast, by simply devoting a few chapters of a manga or a few episodes of a TV show to Cao Cao, it is possible to really develop his character and have time to show that perhaps he is not quite the evil man that his enemies make him out to be. Since these forms of entertainment are so long running, you can devote plenty of time to Cao Cao's character without necessarily taking away from the other characters.

However, this certainly cannot entirely account for the differences in portrayals, especially since there are also Chinese comic books and TV shows that portray Cao Cao negatively, and there are movies that take the time to humanize and even celebrate him. In order to more fully understand the feelings and opinions that people have about Cao Cao, it is necessary to look at his two defining traits in the light of Chinese and Japanese culture.

One reason why Cao Cao's ambition might be praised in Japan and reviled in China could be because of the respective countries' relationships with the concept of the emperor. In Japanese history, the emperor was seldom a powerful figure. He was more of a political and spiritual figurehead that various shoguns and other rulers used to add legitimacy to their de facto rule. In much Japanese literature there is indeed no compunction against making light of the Emperor. In fact, in many kabuki plays, while the shoguns were so respected that they could not even be named, emperors were often comic figures.⁶⁹ If Japanese authors are willing to treat their own emperor in this way, they would certainly have no problem portraying the Emperor of another country as a weak figure not worthy of respect. Thus, the power of the Cao family in China could be likened to the power of the Ashikaga family or the Tokugawa family in Japan. China also had many periods where the Emperor's ministers or generals were more powerful than the Emperor, but there were just as many times when the Emperor actually was the supreme power in the land, and times where other ambitious men or women were in charge was considered abnormal, and a herald of the imminent end of that dynasty. Thus, in Japan Cao Cao's ambition can be fairly easily associated with state builders such as Tokugawa Ieyasu, who founded the Tokugawa shogunate that ruled Japan for hundreds of years, all under the technical authority of the Japanese emperor, whereas in China he is more likely to be put in the same category as a usurper like Wang Mang, who used his power to briefly overthrow the Han Emperor and declare the Xin dynasty, before he was defeated by another member of the Imperial Liu clan. But, usurper or not, Cao Cao could not succeed alone.

⁶⁹ John Whittier Treat, "Beheaded Emperors and the Absent Figure in Contemporary Japanese Literature," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 109 (1994): 101-102.

Cao Cao's benevolence towards men of talent matches up very well with the Confucian virtue 忠 (zhong), or righteousness. In the *Analects*, Confucius says "a prince should employ his minister according to the rules of propriety; ministers should serve their prince with faithfulness (loyalty)."⁷⁰ Confucius also advocated employing men of noble character, rather than of noble birth. In *Sanguo Yanyi*, Cao Cao definitely employs his men according to the rules of propriety, (although it is arguable whether or not he serves his own prince with faithfulness). Since this is a central Confucian virtue, if in any adaptation Cao Cao possesses it, then in that adaptation he would necessarily be a hero, or at least heroic. Therefore, in a work that seeks to portray Cao Cao as an unrepentant villain it is necessary to somehow subvert this aspect of his character, as in *Three Kingdoms RPG* where it becomes clear that Cao Cao only shows respect to his generals and ministers because of their noble upbringing and his fear of their power within his army. On the other hand, if Cao Cao is meant to be portrayed as a hero, then this becomes a central part of his character. Since many Chinese adaptations downplay or outright reject this aspect of Cao Cao's character, it is clear that they are villainizing him, whereas since many Japanese adaptations celebrate this trait, it is clear that they are glorifying him. The reason that the fact that Cao Cao's loyalty to the men under his command and the fact that they are loyal to him makes him so popular to a Japanese audience may have to do with the fact that "from as early as the period when Chinese writing and its corresponding philosophy entered Japan, loyalty was regarded as perhaps the prime virtue that a Japanese, soldier or otherwise, could possess."⁷¹ The concept of loyalty certainly means that one should be loyal to their superior, but it also encompasses superiors being loyal and good to their subordinates.

⁷⁰*The Analects of Confucius*. trans. Arthur Waley. (New York: Random House, 1938), 27.

⁷¹ G. Cameron Hurst III, "Death, Honor and Loyalty: The Bushido Ideal," *Philosophy East and West* 40 (1990), 516.

Another reason why Cao Cao might be more well liked by the Japanese than by the Chinese is the issue of historical closeness. Simply put, Cao Cao is a very important figure in Chinese history, while having nothing to do with Japanese history. Because of this, Cao Cao, despite his villainous nature, means a lot to the Chinese. For example, when casting the part of Cao Cao for the movie *Red Cliff*, John Woo originally wanted to have Ken Watanabe play him, but the Chinese outcry against a Japanese actor playing such an important Chinese historical figure caused him to go with Zhang Fengyi instead.⁷² In contrast, they had no problem with Shido Nakamura playing the pirate Gan Xing or Takeshi Kaneshiro playing the role of Zhuge Liang, arguably the most popular character in the novel! Thus, the deep historical connection that the Chinese have with the events of this era and the people within it might make many authors reluctant to go against conventional interpretations of Cao Cao's character. And since the conventional interpretation is that he is a villain, most Chinese authors choose to vilify him. However, since Cao Cao's significance in Japan is purely literary rather than historical, it would be much easier for Japanese authors to interpret him more favorably because they are not working against the weight of cultural tradition.⁷³

Probably the biggest reason that Cao Cao is so vilified in China is because of his opposal of Liu Bei, the righteous hero of *Sanguo Yanyi*. Many of the reasons for the reverence towards Liu Bei have already been touched upon, but in *Three Kingdoms and Chinese Culture*, Constantine Tung hits upon another. Liu Bei and his men are so popular because they are tragic heroes, fighting a doomed fight against not only Cao Cao, but the very forces of what she calls

⁷² "Chinese Society Has a New Set of Role Models, New Kinds of Idols" Xinhua News Agency, January 16, 2003.

⁷³ Wai-ming Ng, "The Adaptation of Chinese History into Japanese Popular Culture," in *Manga and the Representation of Japanese History*, ed. Roman Rosenbaum. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3.

“cosmic foreordination.”⁷⁴ *Sanguo Yanyi* is full of signs that the Han dynasty is doomed to collapse and that the Wei dynasty will rise to replace it. Liu Bei, and especially his minister Zhuge Liang know this well, and yet they continue to fight against Heaven’s will because they believe it is the right thing to do. Tung argues that this is what has made Liu Bei and his generals so popular. Since Cao Cao is opposing these righteous, doomed heroes, and is doing so essentially with the free ride of having Heaven’s will on his side, it is easier to look down upon his achievements and to consider him the villain. And of course, this sense of fighting against fate also makes Liu Bei very popular in Japan as well. This goes back to the issue of media used to tell the story. In a short format like the movies and plays that are the norm for Chinese adaptations, the best way to tell a moving story is to have the doomed tragic heroes as the good guys and anyone who opposes them as remorseless villains. In a longer running format such as a comic book or a video game, more time can be spent on developing characters, so there can still be the doomed tragic hero that everybody loves, but there is also time to show their opponents as human beings rather than power hungry monsters.

It is important to note that in many modern adaptations, both in China and in Japan, many of these signs and omens are conspicuously absent, leading to a much more seemingly reality based depiction of events. This is important because it removes the roles of tragic defender of a doomed dynasty and inexorable agent of Heaven’s will from Liu Bei and Cao Cao respectively and puts the answer to the question of the characters’ moral worth squarely on the shoulders of their actual personalities. This creates a much more humanistic portrayal of the characters, and makes their villainy or lack thereof a much more important aspect of the story. Thus, it could be

⁷⁴ Kimberly Besio and Constantine Tung eds. *Three Kingdoms and Chinese Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 3.

said that the portrayal of Cao Cao in these adaptations, whether heroic or villainous, is a much better representation of how people view him than his representation in *Sanguo Yanyi*.

In conclusion, it appears that the differences between the Chinese interpretations of Cao Cao and the Japanese ones stem mostly from historical differences and differences of medium of transmission, rather than any fundamental cultural inequalities. Of course, these two cultures are fundamentally different in many ways, but, at least in this specific case, the main differences come from a more practical cause. Interestingly, this is a very good analogy for modern Sino-Japanese relations, in which current conflicts are arising from historical grievances and practical concerns such as resources rather than cultural incompatibilities. The fact that this story continues to stir the hearts and imaginations of generation after generation of both Chinese and Japanese readers is but one of many pieces of common ground that these two populations have.

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