This is the combined twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth issue of *East Asian History*, printed in December 2004, in the series previously entitled *Papers on Far Eastern History*. An externally refereed journal, it is published twice a year.
CONTENTS

1 The Origins of Han-Dynasty Consort Kin Power
   Brett Hinsch

25 Inventing the Romantic Kingdom: the Resurrection and Legitimization of the Shu Han Kingdom before the Romance of the Three Kingdoms
   Simon Shen

43 Illusions of Grandeur: Perceptions of Status and Wealth in Late-Ming Female Clothing and Ornamentation
   Sarah Dauncey

69 The Legal and Social Status of Theatrical Performers in Beijing during the Qing
   Ye Xiaoqing

85 In the Tang Mountains We Have a Big House
   Michael Williams

   Kim Hyung-A

141 Japanese Orphans from China: History and Identity in a 'Returning' Migrant Community
   Li Narangoa

161 Sun-Facing Courtyards: Urban Communal Culture in Mid-1970s' Shanghai
   Nicole Huang

183 Liu Dong and his Defence of Theory and Confucianism as Practice
   Gloria Davies

191 The Weberian View and Confucianism
   Liu Dong
   —translated by Gloria Davies
Cover calligraphy  Yan Zhenqing 颜真卿, Tang calligrapher and statesman

Cover illustration  A memorial from the chief eunuch Bian Dekui — “The Legal and Social Status of Theatrical Performers in Beijing During the Qing” by Ye Xiaqing, see p.81.
INVENTING THE ROMANTIC KINGDOM:  
THE RESURRECTION AND LEGITIMIZATION  
OF THE SHU HAN KINGDOM BEFORE THE  
ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS

Simon Shen 沈旭暉

O so vast, O so mighty,  
The Great River rolls to sea,  
Flowers do waves thrash,  
Heroes do sands smash,  
When all the dreams drain,  
Same are lose and gain.

—Luo Guanzhong, Romance of the Three Kingdoms

When the decline of the Roman Empire began after the second century, the  
demise of Rome’s counterpart in the East, the Han dynasty of China (206 BC–AD 9; AD 25–220), was already well into its final stage. Troubled for decades by land annexations, palace rivalries and eunuch politics, the central government of the Eastern Han gradually lost effective control over its territories after the Yellow Turban Rebellion 黃巾之亂 in AD 184. Despite the efforts of Cao Cao 曹操, the military ruler of the Han, to hold together some semblance of a united realm, dozens of warlords still competed for land and resources. After the Battle of Red Cliff 赤壁之戰 in AD 208, only three rivals remained, including Cao of the central government, and the joint winners of the battle, Liu Bei 劉備 and Sun Quan 孫權. When Cao died in AD 220, his son Cao Pi 曹丕 overthrew the Eastern Han dynasty and established the Wei 魏 kingdom. With the establishment of the Shu Han 蜀漢 kingdom  

2 The Han dynasty is divided into two periods: the Western Han 西漢 (206 BC–AD 9) and the Eastern Han 東漢 (AD 25–220), with an interlude of the Xin 新 dynasty (AD 9–23) in between.  
3 The official name of the kingdom was “Wei,” but in order to distinguish it from other regimes named “Wei,” sometimes it is conventionally known as the “Cao-Wei 曹魏 kingdom.”
Similar to that of Wei, the formal name of the regime was “Han.” However, in order to
distinguish it from the unified Han dynasty,
Liu Bei's regime is known as the Shu Han
kingdom, and this is the name that will be
used in this article (Shu 蜀 being the archaic
name for the region it controlled—the Sichuan
basin).

The rulers of the three kingdoms in fact all
claimed the title of emperor 皇帝. However,
because none was qualified to establish a real
“empire” in a divided China, their regimes are
still conventionally known as “kingdoms” 王
国.

Despite intermittent attempts to attack the
Wei border, the Wu kingdom was mainly
concerned about the development of southeast
China rather than focusing on its two rivals. For
example, the kingdom sent an expedition to
explore present-day Taiwan in AD 230
without
aiming to conquer the territories of Wei or Shu Han. Sima
Guang, Zi zhi tangjian [Comprehensive mirror
for aid in government] (Taiwan: Commercial

The Wei kingdom viewed both the other two
kingdoms as usurpers, and described them as
“bandits” in official documents. For instance,
in AD 227 Sun Zi 孫資, a Wei official, told his
ruler that “the Shu Han bandits could only hide
in mountains; the Wu bandits could only hide
in lakes.” Sima Guang, Zi zhi tangjian, year
227, entry 4 (translation by the author).

Chen wrote the book during the Western Jin
dynasty, when he served as a court official.
Generally it appears to be an objective source
recording most contemporary historic events.
However, some possible biases owing to Chen’s
official position will be mentioned in later sec-
tions. Chen Shou, San guo zhi [History of the
three kingdoms], ed. Chen Naqian (Beijing:
China Bookstall, 1959).
Juxtaposed with historical accounts recorded from primary sources, particularly Chen Shou's biographical history *San guo zhi* 三國志 (History of the Three Kingdoms) and Sima Guang's *Zi zhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government), the favourable attitude of the Chinese people toward the Shu Han kingdom is paradoxical—the truths largely contradicting the Utopian image of the kingdom. For, like many of its Sichuanese predecessors and successors, the Shu Han kingdom was merely a short-lived, small, regional regime in the remote Chinese past without a significant cultural or economic legacy. Like many regimes in a divided, chaotic world, the kingdom was also established by Machiavellian strategies and developed a warlike posture that resulted in limited indigenous support.

As revealed by historical evidence, the Shu Han image indeed went through a process of romanticization through which the realities gradually became buried. Of the various primary sources contributing to the romanticized images of the Shu Han, the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is easily the widest-known and most popular, with interesting variants such as the Republican novel *Fan San guo yan yi* 反三國演義 (Reverse of Romance of the Three Kingdoms) representing the extreme version of such romanticization (see Figure 1). The result has been that most Chinese people have favoured the Shu Han kingdom over many much stronger, longer-lived, and truly national dynasties, such as the Eastern Han or Song dynasty (AD 960–1127).

Owing to an intellectual devotion to studying the later stages of romanticization of the Shu Han kingdom, particularly after the emergence of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, this article only aims to study the mythologization in its earlier stages—i.e. the reshaping of the artificial resurrection and legitimization of the regime before the sixth century. Without understanding the earlier processes, the easy acceptance of the future *Romance* would be hard to comprehend. In so doing, I will attempt, in the following sections, to disinter the historical truths that contrast with the myth.

---

10 Although Sima Guang wrote his book in the Song dynasty (AD 960–1127), he systematically separated the historical account and sources from his subjective comments in the chronicles; thus the book can be viewed as both a primary and a secondary source. Sima Guang, *Zi zhi tongjian* (Taiwan: Commercial Publishing, 1966), unless otherwise cited. The article will also use Bo Yang’s 1993 edition of *Zi zhi tongjian* for commentaries cited by the editor (Taiwan: Far Current Publishing, 1993).


---

Figure 1 (and 2 and 3 overleaf)
Romanticized images of Shu Han leaders in their extreme versions in Zhou Dayong, *Fan San guo yan yi* [Reverse of Romance of the Three Kingdoms].
Before exploring the details, however, let us first consider the application of the romanticization in more recent Chinese history.

**Application of Romanticization**

To start with, we have to acknowledge that the romanticization was motivated by political, diplomatic, ideological and social calculations. Dismantling the myth, or “returning mythic heroes to historical figures” as cultural scholar Jin Ze 金澤 suggests,\(^\text{13}\) might be painful to some admirers. But the search for historical truths might nonetheless motivate people to further explore hidden knowledge about their past, and serve as a schema on which to develop a better understanding of Chinese history, politics, society and culture. Most

\(^{13}\text{Jin Ze, Ying xiong chong bai yu wen hua xing tai [Hero worship and cultural transfiguration] (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1991), p.13.}\)
strikingly, the romanticization presents a classic example of the long-term distortion of primary sources by a secondary effort involving a large number of people living in different periods of time. The persistence of Shu Han’s elevated status, coupled with its meagre long-term impact on history, remains a prime example of the power of historical myth-making.

Indeed, imitators of an idealized Shu Han image have sometimes influenced actual historical events. Many historical figures who explicitly modeled themselves on the Shu Han heroes unexpectedly failed to succeed in the same way the former were believed to have, or even authored political or military fiascoes. For instance, General Guo Ni 郭倪 of the Southern Song 南宋 dynasty (AD 1128–1279) imitated the wise Zhuge Liang’s style of dress and used mu niu liu ma 木牛流馬 (the wooden oxen and the rolling horses). Zhuge’s mechanical tools for transportation ten centuries earlier, in the battleground. Ironically, Guo’s army was roundly defeated by the Jurchen 女真, resulting in the Taiwanese writer Bo Yang giving him the nickname “Zhuge Liang with tears” (dai zhi Zhuge Liang 帶汁諸葛亮). Without an understanding of the whole process of romanticization, historians cannot fully explain the repeated, if often peripheral, imitation of ancient figures by the Chinese people.

In the past, some historians have suggested that ancient China was a hierarchical society with limited social mobility. The sociologist Max Weber labeled China a “feudal and prebendal state” that rarely permitted inter-class movements. Although the Weberian characterization is no longer accepted at face value, the transfiguration of the Shu Han image still poses a forceful challenge to rigid structural interpretations of Chinese culture. It demonstrates a mixture of elitist and popular culture, as the myth-making features both state sponsorship and broader participation by ordinary people. In other words, the Shu Han mythologization was not strictly manipulated from the top down or the bottom up, but by a mixture of both, and has in that sense contributed to a national sense of cultural unity.

In tying the myth to its application today, the popular perception of history and the actual political agenda are undoubtedly still intertwined in China. Understanding the former can at times enable political scientists to predict the latter. For example, in 1999, Premier Zhu Rongji 朱鎔基 openly acknowledged the achievements of Emperor Yongzheng 雍正 (reigned AD 1722–35) of the Qing 清 dynasty (AD 1644–1912) in order to emphasize his determination to promote reforms paralleling those of the Qing emperor. As a result, Zhu created a fashion in China for glorifying Yongzheng that was viewed as popular support for this anti-corruption campaign. By the same token, the projection of the Shu Han image into the contemporary political arena may enable scholars to discern popular political sentiments. Continued widespread interest in the Shu Han heroes, for instance, might imply a strong desire for a non-corrupt, righteous Chinese regime. But how was it that this
19 Some historians use the term “Huns” as a synonym for the Xiongnu, but no consensus has been reached regarding their relationship. The article will describe this minority group as the “Xiongnu.”

20 Note that “sixteen” is not an accurate number, as there were further tiny regimes established at the time on a more temporary basis. Moreover, only four of the many kingdoms were indeed established by the Han Chinese.

21 Huang Fanguang, who studies one of the minority kingdoms named Cheng-Han 成漢 (AD 304–47), suggests that most primary sources of the Cheng-Han kingdom—a regime that we shall soon look into—were lost when the Jin dynasty conquered it in AD 347. Huang Fanguang, Cheng Han xing wang ji ji dui dwai guan xi [The rise and fall of Cheng-Han and its external relations] (Taiwan: Private Chinese Culture Institute, 1973), p.141.

---

Image was resuscitated in the first place? To answer this question, we should go back 1,700 years to the end of the Three Kingdoms in China.

**Resuscitation**

As we have seen, after its immediate collapse the Shu Han kingdom was viewed as little more than a short-lived regional political entity. The whole process of romanticization began in a low-profile manner in the fourth century. After its unification of China, the Western Jin dynasty soon faced the challenges of decentralization and non-ethnic Han 漢族 rebellions. From AD 311 to 316, the minority Xiongnu 匈奴 captured both Jin capitals of Luoyang 洛陽 and Chang'an 長安, resulting in the collapse of the dynasty and the beginning of the Era of Disunion 五胡十六國 (c. AD 304–439); the Jin royalty continued their reign in the southeast (known as the Eastern Jin 東晉 dynasty, AD 317–420), while other areas of China fell under the control of roughly sixteen kingdoms. 20 According to Huang Fanguang 黃繁光, a Chinese scholar focusing on this period, historians are hard-pressed to understand the domestic policies of these brief kingdoms because of the disappearance of primary sources. 21 As a result, most scholars have not realized that the Shu Han myth originated as early as the fourth century, resulting in the understandable unfamiliarity of this early phase of fictionalization. In fact, this period laid the foundation for the future transfiguration of the Shu Han image because it helped prolong the regime even if only in name. Although the authors of the Shu Han myth at this time were not necessarily supporters, their practices distinguished the kingdom from its regional predecessors and successors, initiating a legend with unintended consequences.

Because the legacy of the Shu Han kingdom was still vivid in the minds of contemporaries after the Jin fell in the north, some insurgent kings purposely forged links between themselves and the Shu Han leaders, or even claimed direct kinship with the Liu family, enlisting Liu Bei as a spiritual co-founder of their own kingdoms. Two different strategies for using the Shu Han legacy can be distinguished at this time. The first was devised by rulers seeking a broader appeal for their regimes, such as the Xiongnu leader Liu Yuan 劉淵 who founded the Han-Zhao 漢趙 kingdom in AD 304.22
Although Han-Zhao comprised less than a third of the northern region of China, including Loyang and Chang’an (see Map 2), Liu Yuan still aimed at replacing the Jin dynasty and unifying the whole country. In order to attract popular support, gain favour from the ethnic Chinese, and challenge the legitimacy of the Jin dynasty, Liu Yuan awkwardly linked his Xiongnu ancestry with the Han emperors and named his new kingdom “Han.” According to the *Jin shu* (History of the Jin dynasty), written in the Tang period (AD 618–907), Liu's self-identification as a Han descendant was based on the following logic: the Xiongnu leader shared the same surname with Han royalty, Liu, because one of his ancestors had married a Han princess four centuries earlier—which was, ironically, distasteful to Liu Bang 劉邦, the founder of the Western Han dynasty.23 As the Xiongnu king proudly told his ministers,

The Han dynasty has lasted for a long time and granted many merits to the people. I am the nephew of Han descendants. As the Eastern Han has met its demise, why can I not acceed to the Han throne?24

As a side-effect of this claim to his lineage, the Shu Han founder Liu Bei, who had the same family connection, was naturally a welcome addition to Liu Yuan’s arbitrary ancestor list. Without a tangible legacy within the Shu Han region, Liu Yuan relied on official and religious ceremonies to link him with his alleged Han ancestors. As recorded in the *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government*, when Liu Yuan formally founded his kingdom, he officially honoured Liu Chan 劉禪, the last Shu Han ruler, as “Emperor Xiao Huai 孝懷皇帝; built three main royal temples to worship Liu Bang, Liu Xiu 劉秀25 and Liu Bei as the “Three Great Ancestors” (san zhu 三祖), and constructed five lesser temples to worship the “Five Lesser Ancestors” (wu zong 五宗).26

This is the first known record in history associating Liu Bei with the founders of the Western and Eastern Han dynasties after the collapse of Shu Han. More important, Liu Bei in the Han-Zhao temple was placed even higher in status than many genuine Han emperors, such as the famous Emperor Wu 武帝 (141–87 BC). Thus, a wider symbolic resurrection of the Shu Han was unconsciously prompted by Li Yuan’s efforts, through which Shu Han rulers were posthumously legitimized as heirs to the Han dynasty.

The Badi 巴氐 minority leader, Li Xiong 李雄, who founded Shu Han’s regional successor, the Cheng-Han 成漢 kingdom (AD 304–47),27 made a different calculation. Establishing his kingdom in Sichuan, Li Xiong had no evident ambition to expand his kingdom beyond the Shu Han boundaries (see Map 2). Unlike the Xiongnu, who dreamed of unifying China, the Badi were content to control Sichuan alone as a regional power. The Shu Han experience thus became an historic justification for the existence of their new Sichuan regime, and a recent precedent to inculcate indigenous Sichuan people with separatist sentiments. By associating itself with Shu Han, Cheng-Han succeeded in maintaining its regional hegemony with little territorial ambition for thirty years, since other powers neither recognized nor focused on it.

---

22 The Xiongnu kingdom was first named Han by Liu Yuan in AD 304, then renamed Zhao 趙 by Liu Yuan’s descendant Liu Yao 劉曜 in AD 318, and thus was known as the Han-Zhao or Early Zhao 前趙 kingdom in Chinese history. In order to emphasize its linkage to Han, the article will use the former name for convenience.


24 Ibid. (translation by the author).

25 Liu Bang was the founder of the Western Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 9); Liu Xiu was the founder of the Eastern Han dynasty (AD 25–220). The “Five Lesser Ancestors” were other genuine Han emperors.

26 Sima Guang, *Zi zhi tong jian* (966), year 304, entry 17 (translation by the author).

27 The kingdom was first named Cheng 成 by Li Xiong in AD 304, and was renamed Han by Li Xiong’s descendant Li Shou 李壽 in AD 338; thus it is known as the Cheng-Han kingdom for convenience.
Because the regional concentration of the Badi has not attracted much historical attention, unlike the straightforward Han-Zhao ancestor-hunt, historians often neglect the Cheng-Han contribution to the Shu Han myth. In fact, the Cheng-Han policies aroused indigenous Sichuan separatist sentiment by substantially continuing or, more correctly, modifying the Shu Han legacy in the region. When the kingdom was founded, Li Xiong explicitly imitated Shu Han policies in ruling Sichuan, such as appointing a Zhuge Liang-type hermit, Fan Changsheng 范長生—who was alive in Zhuge's time and was elevated to quasi-god status after his death in AD 318—as his chancellor.28

As recorded in the History of the Jin, Cheng-Han rulers also reintroduced the Shu Han chancellor's internal legal reform in the territories to pursue a continuation of regional policy, even if the policy was not welcomed by landholders in either regime. For instance, Li Xiong confiscated lands owned by the gentry and nobility, and forbade illegal land annexations that were commonly practiced in the Eastern Jin dynasty.29 Such reforms were compatible with Zhuge's attempt to use legal measures to promote the dignity of government in AD 214, including strict military and taxation laws, as he openly confessed:

I use the laws to scare people today, because people will know the grandeur of the government when the laws are effectively enforced.30

Moreover, although not explicitly documented in the historical record, the preservation of Shu Han sites and relics during the Era of Disunion should probably be credited to the subsequent Sichuan regimes, including Cheng-Han. Famous Shu Han relics, including the palace of the White Emperor City 白帝城 and the Zhuge Liang and Liu Bei Temples, were extant for later poetic romanticization,32 and still exist today due to their efforts. Indigenous people were thus enabled to continue visiting and memorializing their old rulers, leaving the veneration of Shu Han leaders undisturbed even down to the twentieth century, as visitors have observed.33

In an eventual volte-face, Cheng-Han also euphemistically imitated Han-Zhao's ancestor-seeking propaganda. Because Li Shou 李壽, the fourth Cheng-Han emperor, was dissatisfied with the limited territorial achievements of his Badi ancestors, he turned to model himself on Emperor Wu of the Western Han dynasty and switched his nation's focus from regional interests to the unification of China. Thus, in AD 338, he renamed his country Han, naturally including Liu Bei and his son Liu Chan in his list of ancestors. Ironically, Li Shou's ambitious pretension burdened his small country, resulting in the annexation of Cheng-Han by the Eastern Jin in AD 347.

Viewed from another angle, Shu Han was fortunate in that the Era of Disunion followed within half a century of its collapse, because popular history is often distorted, especially by accounts exaggerating the merits of the founding emperors and the evils of the final rulers.34 Owing to "the interdepartmental obstructionism that is always inseparable from bureaucracy," as British sinologist Denis Twitchett observed, Chinese official historians faced restrictions in providing objective biographies.35 The fate of other
Sichuan regimes, among other regional dynasties, frequently demonstrated their diminished historical status. The principalities of Ba and Shu in the Warring-states Era, for example, lasted for hundreds of years, but their histories were said to have been destroyed in the book-burning frenzy of the Qin dynasty (220–206 BC) after earlier being involuntarily incorporated by the Qin state. The little-known, short-lived Cheng Jia kingdom (AD 25–36) ruled Sichuan for eleven years during the founding years of the Eastern Han dynasty, but even its status as a regional regime is omitted by most historians.

Thus, if the Jin dynasty had lasted for another century or more, perhaps the Shu Han kingdom would reasonably have followed the historic path of Ba, Shu and Cheng Jia. In fact, the Jin dynasty did try to eliminate the Sichuan regional veneration of the old Shu Han leaders and modify Shu Han history in a number of ways. As a humiliating act, the last Shu Han emperor, Liu Chan—whose nickname Ah Dou became a synonym for a foolish ruler in the works of later historians—was put under house arrest in Luoyang after his kingdom was destroyed. Chen Shou revealed Liu’s humble position in the Jin court:

Liu Chan was asked to move the entire royal family to Luoyang. The Jin emperor told him, “Now you become the Duke of Anle of our dynasty. As you cared about your people and surrendered to our great dynasty, your land is now safe … I really appreciate your decision.”

Moreover, in writing the history of Shu Han for the Jin royalty, Chen deliberately camouflaged Wei’s inability to defeat the Shu Han army, and exaggerated the setbacks of Shu Han policies. The Russian literary scholar Boris Riftin even suggested that Chen made some personal attacks on the son of Zhuge Liang in the History of the Three Kingdoms:

The Sichuan people memorialized Zhuge Liang, thus crediting his son, Zhuge Zhan, with most of the government decisions of other ministers after Zhuge Liang’s death. However, Zhuge Zhan was mediocre, his reputation was credited with much more than he deserved.

Riftin suggested that the way Chen criticized the heir of Zhuge Liang as the over-assessed noble might be Chen’s personal revenge on the Zhuge family, because the son of Zhuge Liang had once punished Chen when he was serving the Shu Han government. Riftin, of course, believed that Zhuge Zhan was not ‘mediocre’.

Lastly, we can assess the importance of the resurrection of Shu Han by contrasting its fate with that of the contemporary Wu kingdom. Wu was militarily stronger and territorially larger than Shu Han, but later regional rulers never used it for propaganda, perhaps because its territory was fully occupied by the subsequent Eastern Jin dynasty, which had no need to forge a new ancestry to gain national appeal fifty years after its foundation. Wu’s strong regional stance and lack of unifying ambitions also discouraged regimes from appealing to the entire nation to claim it as their predecessor. Thus, because of the aloof attitude of insurgent rulers toward it, in contrast to Shu Han, the Wu

---

37 Sima Guang, Zi zhi tong jian (1966), years 25–36.
38 Other regional regimes founded in the Sichuan region in Chinese history include the Shu kingdom (AD 405–13) in the later Era of Disunion, the Early Shu kingdom (AD 907–25) and the Later Shu kingdom (AD 934–65) in the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (c. AD 907–60), and the Xia kingdom (AD 1362–71) at the beginning of the Ming dynasty (AD 1368–1644).
39 There is a Chinese idiom, le bu si Shu (too happy to remember Shu Han), describing Liu Chan’s happiness in the Jin capital when Shu Han went into demise. Adou, Liu Chan’s nickname, now also denotes a useless person unable to be assisted even by people with Zhuge Liang’s intelligence.
40 Chen Shou, San guo zhi, Book Shu, pp.901–2 (translation by the author).
41 Sima Yi, the Wei chief commander, was the grandfather of the first emperor of the Jin dynasty. Chen Shou was subject to pressure from the Jin royalty to glorify the Sima ancestors. However, some scholars, like Li Dongfang, also suggest that Chen’s version of history is objective enough. Li Dongfang, Xi shuo san guo, pp.369–70. As Chen’s account is the main primary source available on the history of the Three Kingdoms, whether the source is biased remains a matter of academic controversy.
43 Chen Shou, San guo zhi, Book Shu, p.932 (translation by the author).
44 The ancient Wu predecessors, the kingdoms of Wu and Yue during the Warring states era, had also been considered culturally peripheral to the “cradle” of Zhou civilization.
kingdom was not a candidate for romanticization in Chinese history.

The images of Shu Han confabulated with the Xiongnu and the Badi, the legitimate national government and the indigenous regional hegemon, respectively, did not match the historical facts in the Three Kingdoms era. Here this article will explain the exiled nature of the Shu Han kingdom and its distinction from an indigenous regional regime, and will reserve arguments against the asserted nationwide Shu Han legitimacy for later.

Although the historian Ray Huang explains the division of the Three Kingdoms in terms of geopolitics, suggesting that Sichuan was already isolated from central China in the third century, the Shu Han regime was in fact alien to the indigenous people. While the Shu Han policies were emulated by the later Sichuan regime of Cheng-Han, they were little more than dictatorial orders issued by outsiders. Already noticed in the Cheng-Han kingdom by some officials, though not condoned by the royalty, the participation of indigenous Sichuan people in the Shu Han government was negligible.

When Gong Zhuang 龔壯 persuaded Li Shou, the fourth Cheng-Han ruler, to hire more indigenous Sichuan people in the government, he reminded Li of Shu Han’s alien posture toward the Sichuan people:

When Liu Bei ruled Sichuan, those in power came from the north and the east. Sadly, when Shu Han was overthrown, most outsiders were slaughtered. In fact, indigenous people of the Shu Han kingdom were dissatisfied, as implied by Qiao Zhou 謝周, one of the few Sichuan elite serving in the Shu Han government. In his “Essay on Enemy Kingdoms” (Chou guo lun 鏗國論) submitted as a petition to Liu Chan in AD 257, where he describes Wei as a “zhao jian zhi guo” 齊建之國 (a booming country) and Shu Han as a “yin yu zhi guo” 因餘之國 (a doomed country), Qiao warned the last Shu Han emperor:

Riots will break out when people can no longer tolerate their current hardships; the country will collapse when the ministers cease to care about the people, and the officials are brutal to citizens . . . If there are constant wars and a mishap occurs, even the wisest will be unable to show the way of safety.

Switching sides to serve the Jin government after the collapse of Shu Han, Qiao, representing indigenous interests, was already discontented with the Shu Han regime. The description in his petition implied that, with a primary focus on external warfare against the Wei kingdom, Shu Han rarely set any long-term goals for developing Sichuan apart from extracting the region’s resources to expand its territories. Some Sichuan landholders also resented the Shu Han distrust of them in government, as shown by the way in which the strict social control imposed by Zhang Yi 張嶷, governor-general of present-day Yunnan 雲南, stirred up a number of local rebellions. As proved by the stance of local élites who

---

46 For instance, among the top generals recorded in Book Shu of San guo zhi (the most famous including Guan Yu 閻羽, Zhang Fei 張飛, Zhao Yun 趙雲, Ma Chao 马超, Huang Zhong 黃忠 and Wei Yan 魏延), none came from the Sichuan region. Among the top administrative ministers recorded in the same book (the best known including Zhuge Liang, Pang Tong 張統, Jiang Wan 姜琬, Fei Yi 費祎, Deng Zhi 鄧芝, Fa Zheng 法正 and Qiao Zhou 謝周), only Fa and Qian were indigenous Sichuan people. Chen Shou, San guo zhuan (263 CE), Book Shu, pp.174–5.
47 Sima Guang, Zi zhi tongjian (1966), year 338, entry 1 (translation by the author).
48 Qiao had served in different educational and internal affairs positions in the Shu Han government. Ibid, year 257, entry 6.
49 Qiao Zhou, Chou guolun [Essay on enemy kingdoms], as quoted in Sima Guang, Zi zhi tongjian (1966), year 257, entry 6 (translation by the author).
50 For instance, refer to the rebellions led by indigenous leaders Wei Lang 魏狼 and Dong Feng 冬逢. Chen Shou, San guo zhi, Book Shu, p.1703.
51 Luo Kaiyu, a contemporary Hong Kong scholar, emphasizes the lack of indigenous support of the Shu Han regime. Luo Kaiyu, San guo zhi [History of the Three Kingdoms] (Hong Kong: China Bookstore, 1998), pp.174–5. Luo’s book also presents some other modern perspectives in the study of the real history of the Three Kingdoms.
did not provide the regime with any support when the Wei army besieged present-day Chongqing 重慶 in AD 263. As the leading indigenous scholar, Qiao was the first Shu Han official to even propose surrender.

In short, the Shu Han regime was merely an exiled government based temporarily in Sichuan, dominated by elites from present-day Hunan 湖南 and Gansu 甘肅, not caring much about the region at all. “Governors, but no government,” suggested the Japanese historian Hisayuki Miyakawa, correctly noting that “the attitude of the native southern subjects was conditioned by the individual character of the local official.” Just as few historians would argue that the Nationalist 国民黨 government’s temporary settlement in Sichuan during World War II (AD 1937–45) was a beneficial interlude for the indigenous Sichuan people, the same could be said of the Shu Han regime.

Nevertheless, the combination of the Xiongnu glorification of the regime and the Badi continuation of Zhuge Liang’s legacy rescued Shu Han from possible oblivion. Without attempts to link Shu Han with other indigenous powers in the Era of Disunion, the Sichuan people would not have felt any particular nostalgia for the regime. By the same token, without attempts to equate Liu Bei with Liu Bang, such positive sentiment would never have extended to China as a whole. Although Cheng-Han and Han-Zhao collapsed within a matter of decades, the image of Shu Han among fellow Chinese was nonetheless reinstated, if not yet romanticized; such a reinstatement was vital for the unfolding of the myth-making process.

**Legitimization**

Although Shu Han surpassed Wu and other regional powers in being resurrected by insurgent rulers in the fourth century, the kingdom was still illegitimate in the view of traditional historians, who applied the “rule of the central capital” (shoudu lun 首都論), which judged the legitimacy of regimes by the possession of the central (i.e. dynastic) capital city. When the Wei kingdom controlled the central regions of China, including the ancient capitals of Luoyang and Chang’ an, most contemporary historians, like Chen Shou, treated Shu Han rulers as usurpers, subordinate in status to Wei. The Jin court, too, acknowledged Wei’s legitimacy in the Three Kingdoms era because it theoretically inherited the Mandate of Heaven 天命 from the former. Fortunately for Shu Han, after the Jin’s withdrawal to the south in AD 316, Jin and subsequent southern regimes gradually reevaluated their assessment of the Three Kingdoms, and finally replaced Wei with Shu Han as their legitimate predecessor prompted by two political impulses. First, almost solely under the influence of the Northern Wei 北魏 kingdom (AD 386–556) founded by the Xianbei 鲜卑 minority, northern China was gradually unified by the Northern Dynasties 北朝. At the same time, southern...
accepted him.” Mencius, Mencius, trans. D. C. Lau (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin Books, 1970), Book 5A, V. However, the alleged voluntary practice was transformed into a formula by which every ambitious minister could overthrow the dynasty, such as the manner in which Jin replaced Wei.

59 Luo Guanzhong, Romance of the Three Kingdoms, p.viii.


61 The same treatment also applied to other minority regimes controlling central China in later periods of division, such as the Liao 遼 dynasty (AD 916-1125) and the Jin 金 (Jurchen) dynasty (AD 1115–1234).

62 Chen Shou, San guo zhi, Book Shu, p.871.

China was never seriously divided: Eastern Jin and four consecutive dynasties, known as the Southern Dynasties 南朝 (c. AD 420–589), dominated the region. Consequently, the distribution of power in China gradually shifted, from the late fourth century onwards, from a balance between several centres to a north-south divide. The historical status of the north and the south were subtly exchanged, the previously “barbaric” south being home to the civilized Jin dynasty, while the former cultural centres in the north fell into the hands of non-Han minorities. Thus, maintaining the legitimate status of Wei inevitably attracted the same status for the Northern Dynasties in general, and the Northern Wei kingdom in particular. Doing so meant demeaning the Southern Dynasties, reducing them to the same “barbaric” or insurgent status that Chen Shou had previously assigned Shu Han, which was intolerable for the southern elites. As a result, legitimizing Shu Han simply meant symbolizing the southern regimes as the central legitimate government in China.

As Robert Hegel argues in his introduction to Brewitt Taylor’s translation of Romance of the Three Kingdoms:

[During periods when China was threatened by invasion from the north—or was divided or occupied by northerners—sympathies tended to extend that favored position to [Shu Han]. Those who did not question the rectitude of the so-called “conquest dynasties” who took power by main force have generally remained pro-Wei in their reading of history; in times of national division, Liu Bei and his forces became emblematic of Han Chinese national sentiment.]

Hegel’s comment indicates that an ethnic dimension was part of the process of romanticization. To ethnic Han scholars, particularly before the Mongol Yuan 元 dynasty (AD 1279–1368), legitimacy should or would never fall into the hands of minorities, because they had long developed discriminatory attitudes toward the latter. Even Confucius said, “Barbarian tribes with their rulers are inferior to Chinese states without them” 夷狄之有君不如諸夏之亡也. Because most northern regimes in the Era of Disunion were founded by minorities, they were naturally barred from attaining legitimacy from the point of view of contemporary Han scholars, most of whom placed ethnic consciousness above other political considerations.

In searching for arguments to legitimize the Shu Han kingdom, the southern scholars turned to the “rule of inheritance” (xuētōng lùn 血統論), which granted legitimate status to regimes with a blood heritage from the last dynasty. Throughout his life, the Shu Han founder Liu Bei repeatedly asserted his legitimacy by inheritance from the Eastern Han royal family, claiming himself to be the direct descendant of the fourth Western Han emperor Jing 景帝 (157–141 BC) and the uncle of the last Eastern Han emperor Xian 猷帝 (AD 189–220). Chen Shou recorded, perhaps apocryphally, that Liu Bei’s aspiration from childhood was to be an emperor:

Liu Bei’s home had a tree five feet tall that looked like a crown when seen
from far away. People thought that the tree represented a nobleman . . . . When Liu was playing chess when he was young, he told his playmates, “I will surely sit in a royal cart in the future.”

Lacking the technology to confirm the genetic relationship of these rulers, southern scholars—although rarely explicitly confronting the Wei legitimacy—obliquely agreed with Liu’s claim to the Han line. For example, in commenting on Chen Shou’s History of the Three Kingdoms, Eastern Jin scholar scholar Xi Zaochi 習塤齒 acknowledged Shu Han as the legitimate regime by using its years as the dating entries in The History of Han to Jin (Han Jin chun qiu 漢晉春秋). In fact, the legitimization of Shu Han became unconsciously eased by traditional Chinese historiographic methodology. Because Chinese historians had no universal dating system other than using the titles of emperors to record years, the controversy of legitimacy was not only a symbolic issue but also a practical one for them in attempting to create a chronology in their writing. As Sima Guang suggested, some historians granted legitimate status to regimes simply for convenience in recording history, and did not thereby impose any value judgments.

The choice of Shu Han to be the target of legitimization also owed something to the political appeal of its specific leaders to the contemporary world order. The historical accounts of the Shu Han leaders conveniently turned them into role models of ethnic Han people, whose ultimate aim was to fight the evil northern enemies. Roughly speaking, three typical Confucian moral values—righteousness (yi 義), benevolence (ren 仁) and wisdom (zhi 智)—could be said to represent the three Shu Han founders respectively. For instance, the value of yi, a prerequisite of the Southern Dynasties to guarantee the exclusive support of ethnic Han elites, was represented by the absolute loyalty of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei 張飛, two famous Shu Han generals, to Liu Bei. To consolidate further the cult of yi, Guan Yu, in particular, was even gradually elevated to the status of a god serving Heaven’s court. Ren, the value at the center of political propaganda contrasting the “civilized” Southern Dynasties with their “barbaric” northern counterpart, was represented by the idealized image of Liu Bei as a benevolent ruler. Zhi, an element the militarily inferior Southern Dynasties largely needed to balance the northern aggression, was represented by the Shu Han chancellor Zhuge Liang in the division of labor, as Zhuge was also facing a militarily-superior northern army.

The legitimization of Shu Han was basically sewn up when the Sui dynasty (AD 589–618) reunified China. Most later scholars echoed this attitude, a notable example being Zhu Xi 朱熹, the synthesizer of Neo-Confucianism in the Southern Song dynasty 南宋 (AD 1128–1279). In Tong jian gang mu 通鑑綱目 (An Abridged View of the Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government), his commentary on Sima Guang’s chronicles which soon became an authorized version of Chinese history, Zhu presented a thorough list of legitimate regimes in the country’s history, which placed Shu Han between the Eastern Han and the Jin. Thus, subsequent Chinese historians, in adhering
In AD 189 Dong Zhuo murdered Emperor Shao, who had succeeded to the throne six months earlier. Many Liu joined the coalition against Dong in AD 190. Sima Guang, *Zi zhi tong jian* (166), year 190, entry 1.

Yuan’s family was the most prominent contemporary gentry family. However, Yuan became the enemy of the Li when he called himself the Zhong emperor in AD 197, and was soon defeated. *Ibid.*, year 197, entries 3 and 4.

Although *Zi zhi tong jian* did not directly record that Liu Bei attacked Liu Yu, Liu Bei belonged to Gongsun Zan’s army at that time when the two warlords were fighting against one another. *Ibid.*, year 191, entries 15 and 16.

In other words, Liu’s family was extremely poor when he was born, and making straw sandals … He was not interested in studying, but rather enjoyed horse-racing, music, and fine clothes …

Ironically, as neither Sima Guang nor Chen Shou recorded any popular echo of Liu’s assertion of royalty, most Shu Han contemporaries, other than Liu’s followers, were probably skeptical of Liu’s alleged royal status for two possible reasons. First, except for a doubtful family annal, even Liu Bei was unable to provide any evidence to prove his relationship with the last Eastern Han Emperor. As it is recorded in *History of the Three Kingdoms*,

Liu Bei was an orphan when he was young, and could only earn his living by making straw sandals … He was not interested in studying, but rather enjoyed horse-racing, music, and fine clothes …

Moreover, many other contemporary warlords with prominent backgrounds also belonged to the Han royal family, including Liu Yu 劉虞, who ruled Youzhou (present-day Beijing); Liu Biao 劉表, who ruled Jingzhou (present-day Hunan); Liu Yao 劉繇, who ruled Yangzhou (present-day Jiangxi 江西); and Liu Zhang 劉璋, who ruled Yizhou 益州 (Sichuan), before being expelled by Liu Bei. The Liu were at times in an undeclared natural alliance against anti-Han warlords, such as Dong Zhuo 董卓, who murdered a young Eastern Han emperor, and Yuan Shu 袁術, who once briefly claimed the title of emperor. More crucially, no historic records showed that the Liu ever attacked one another in this period. But suspiciously, although Liu Bei tried to use his claimed Han ancestry to accumulate political capital, he was the only Liu who attacked other royal lines for power. The *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* records an ample amount of evidence about how he assisted an allied warlord Gongsun Zan’s 公孫瓒 attack on Liu Yu in AD 191, replaced Liu Biao’s son as governor-general as the latter surrendered to Cao Cao in AD 208, and seized Liu Zhang’s Sichuan by military force in AD 212–14. Liu Ba 劉巴, Liu Zhang’s minister, who later served Shu Han, once warned his old master,

Liu Bei is the most evil leader of our generation. When he comes to Sichuan, he will surely harm our interests!

In fact, Liu Bei acted more like a Cao Cao-type warlord aiming at expanding his sphere of influence as much as possible, than like Han royalty aiming at upholding the Liu authority and the central government. If Liu Bei’s battles against other Liu did not necessarily refute his royal heritage, they at least disclose his unfilial behavior to his ancestors.

Even given that there is no historical proof that the righteous loyalty of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei surpassed other relationships between followers and their leaders at the time, the benevolent image of Liu Bei was perhaps
the most distorted Chinese story. Liu was, in fact, infamous for his repeated betrayal of allies in his time. For instance, he attacked Cao Cao after Cao gave him as elaborate welcome as guest-of-honor when he was defeated by other warlords and sought help; he broke his alliance with Sun Quan and occupied Sun’s prefectures; and he seized Sichuan from Liu Zhang when the latter invited him to defend its boundaries against another warlord, Zhang Lu. Liu Bei was not particularly benevolent toward his followers: when he hypocritically stressed his unwillingness to accept the Shu Han throne in AD 219, he imprisoned the army-secretary Fei Shi who supported his refusal to take the imperial title. In short, Liu Bei was merely a typical power-seeker who used both practices of “the fox and the lion” described by Machiavelli. The strategy of Liu Bei recorded in the later Romance of the Three Kingdoms can even be considered as The Prince. according to Ruhlmann, it is “a mine of all tricks and stratagems needed in war and politics” featuring Liu Bei as one of its best performers.

Moreover, concerning the Shu Han policies under Zhuge Liang, John Wills, a scholar who has studied various Chinese heroes, concludes that Zhuge “proved to be an effective, tough state-builder whose policies were not very different from Cao Cao’s.” In other words, Wills believes that both Zhuge and Cao favored ruling by tough laws rather than the Confucian ideal of benevolence. Will’s assertion is supported by the Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government, where it is recorded that many indigenous people were discontented over Zhuge’s tough laws in governing Sichuan, especially following the previous Sichuan warlord, Liu Zhang, who was famous for his lenience. In order to invent a benevolent country for emperors and ministers to imitate, Confucian scholars simply omitted most of the Machiavellian practices of Liu Bei and ignored the legalist nature of Shu Han as a regime administered by less than benign laws under Zhuge Liang. Zhuge may perhaps have been one of the most intelligent figures in Chinese history, but ironically his military talent—the talent stressed in the novel—was his weakest point. As Chen Shou noted, and it is probably a fair comment, Zhuge was “strong in internal politics, weak in military tactics.” in describing how Zhuge failed to advance beyond the Shu Han border in his six military campaigns against Wei (liu chu Qishan 六出祁山) and disappointingly died in his last campaign in AD 234. Perhaps the amateur historian Bo Yang is correct to point out that Zhuge had already lost Shu Han’s golden chance to conquer the central regions of the Wei kingdom because of his overcautious character evident in his first campaign in AD 227.

Nevertheless, the southern scholars’ legitimization of the Shu Han regime was a watershed for its image in history. Afterwards, Shu Han exchanged its previous position as usurper with Wei, and successfully replaced the latter as the legitimate regime of the Era of the Three Kingdoms, thus overcoming the historic barrier to contention for legitimacy. In other words, at the end of the sixth century, the Shu Han kingdom appeared as the legal continuation of the Eastern Han dynasty instead of a new, insurgent regime from the fourth century on. The Shu Han leaders finally became the would-be-rescuers
Conclusion: Reassessing the Nature of the Shu Han “Heroes” for their Later Romanticization

Although at the end of the sixth century the Three Kingdoms era was not a period of remote history, its historical realities and the image of it presented in history was already much blurred. Not only was Shu Han resurrected and legitimized in the process of romanticization outlined in the above, but the kingdoms of Wei and Wu were also vetoed as future subjects of myth-making. From the above account, we can briefly conclude by synthesizing the following initial characteristics of the Shu Han heroes for their later romanticization, as illustrated, particularly, in the novel Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

First, considering the chaotic situation of the Era of Disunion and the Southern Dynasties, the Shu Han image reflected a tendency for contemporary Chinese to want to see their heroes succeed—or even to repudiate their baleful endings. The Shu Han heroes in fact were possessed of tragic elements in their lives: Liu Bei lost his last battle decisively to the Wu kingdom and died the next year; both Guan Yu and Zhang Fei were ultimately defeated in battle and executed; Zhuge Liang also died during his last military campaign. But paradoxically, the Chinese people had “little sense of tragedy or irony,” as David Keightley proposes as one of his seven distinctive Chinese cultural features, because Chinese history often “witnessed the general success and uncomplicated goodness of legendary heroes.” Thus, we observe that the Chinese myth-makers gradually minimized the tragic sense of the Shu Han figures, and granted them outstanding abilities so they could be victorious in imaginary battles. Through labeling evil characters in history, Chinese mythmakers also tended to shift readers’ attention from the tragic end of heroes to cursing those responsible for their deaths. With the readers dissatisfied, even the final outcome of the Shu Han kingdom was eventually rewritten.

Second, as repeatedly stressed by many Western scholars such as David Keightley, Paul Ropp and Robert Ruhlmann, contemporary myth-makers already started to feature traditional Confucian values in their myths, which were “Confucianized fiction[s]” to use Ruhlmann’s terminology. While Westerners favored more rebellious, anti-establishment heroes, Confucian tenets discouraged ambitious individual characters in society. Arthur Wright outlined thirteen “approved attitudes and behavior patterns” for Confucian role-models in Confucian Personalities, including notably the qualities of “submissiveness to authority,” “reverence for the past” and “non-competitiveness.”

Thus, although Liu Bei and his followers challenged the status quo of the Eastern Han dynasty, the myth-makers changed their image to legitimate suc-
cessors to the Han thereby prolonging the old order. Confucian myth-makers also glorified their benevolent, righteous behavior instead of their bold and independent courage in gambling for power in a chaotic world. As a result a figure like Zhuge Liang, for example, was transformed into a “loyal minister to a fallen dynasty,” the very words Ralph Crozier has used in describing the myth-making process applied to the seventh-century pirate leader Zheng Chenggong (高雄).!

By the same token, the monkey Sun Wukong (孫悟空), another formerly rebellious hero in the classic novel Xi you ji (Journey to the West), was transformed from a rebel against the order of Heaven to become a security guard protecting a priest and submitting to the authority of Buddha.86 Even the bandit heroes in Shui bu chuan (Water Margin) in the latter third of the novel surrender to the Song court and help the state suppress other peasant leaders.99 Of course, the Chinese people also honored many founding emperors of dynasties,100 but as the cultural scholar Jin Ze argues,101 the honor was more a response to the emperors’ ability to promote order or the “approved attitudes” that Wright listed.102 Mao Zedong (毛泽东) in contemporary China is perhaps the great exception to the above rule.103

Finally, as seen from the resurrection and legitimization of Shu Han before the sixth century, the Chinese myth-making process involved active state intervention in addition to public participation. “The bureaucratization of historiography” in China, identified by Denis Twitchett, only glorified “the bare account of a subject’s performance of his limited role as a member of the bureaucratic apparatus.”104 More crucially, as Ruhlmann has noted, the Confucian bureaucrats in China could prevent private heroes from emerging through “the pressure of censorship on writers, publishers, and actors, particularly in the later dynasties.”105 Thus, private writers in China could not create the Shu Han myth on their own, because they faced restrictions in granting regimes or individuals legitimate status, the fundamental criterion for any glorious reputation and enduring legacy to be achieved in China. If the state rejected certain figures as historical heroes, ordinary Chinese people tended to ignore them, as evidenced by the lack of respect shown by most Chinese towards Fu Jian (符堅). Most leaders of peasant revolts were also disdained in ancient China106 when their image as “bandits” was reinforced in most traditional history textbooks in China before the Communist Revolution in 1949, as well as in Taiwan and Hong Kong today.107 Of course, there are still some exceptions in Chinese history, such as the case of abiding popular admiration for the pirate leader Zheng Chenggong, the short-lived ruler of Taiwan who was nominally loyal to the Ming court and opposed the establishment of the Qing dynasty.108

Once the state becomes involved in the myth-making process, heroes are inevitably invested with elements of the state-dominated ideology, as we can observe in Communist China’s transfiguration of the images of historic peasant leaders from 1949 on. As an example, the Beijing scholar Zhang...
movements, such as the “Huang Chao Rebellion” 黃巢之亂 of the later Tang dynasty. Refer to Qu Shiqi, Guo shi shu yao [Selected national history] (Hong Kong: Ball Man Bookstore, 1982), pp.115–18. Qu’s book is used as a textbook of Chinese history in Hong Kong.


111 Luo Guanzhong, Romance of the Three Kingdoms, “Overture: the beginning song.”

Chuanxi 張傳信 has compared the “uprising” of Chen Sheng 陳勝 and Wu Guang 吳廣 against the Qin dynasty with the peasant movement led by Mao in the 1920s. The notorious official writing team “Liang Xiao” 梁效 during the Cultural Revolution 文化大革命 even borrowed Communist jargon to credit Chen’s contribution in inspiring Mao’s revolution as being an anti-federalist forerunner.

Nevertheless, the transition of the Shu Han kingdom from a weak, short-lived, illegitimate, Machiavellian, regional regime to a powerful, orthodox, Confucian political Utopia for the Chinese people to fantasize about is now a fait accompli. The romanticization was neither a pre-determined routine repertoire in Chinese history, nor simply a creation for leisure. Had China not disintegrated between AD 280 and 589, the Shu Han myth might well never have been created.

Yet, as the kingdom became a political Utopia, everyone would be able to project his or her different hopes onto the non-existent regime. Although their messages are not necessarily the same, the dream of a harmonious, happy, living world with a responsible, non-corrupt government is never questioned. No matter how artificially distorted, the abiding images of Shu Han effectively represented, represent, and may continue to represent the same dream for the Chinese people in the future.

Green mountains remain,  
As sunsets ingrain,  
Hoary fishers and woodcutters,  
And some small rafts and calm waters,  
In autumn moon, in spring winds,  
By the wine jars, by porcelains,  
Discuss talk and tale,  
Only laugh and gale.

—Luo Guanzhong, Romance of the Three Kingdoms.  