

MAN FROM THE MARGIN

Cao Cao and the Three Kingdoms

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George Ernest Morrison was a remarkable man, of great energy, imagination and influence in the relations between China and the West. From his writings and papers, moreover, it appears that he was able to maintain a successful balance between his love and appreciation of China and his own sense of identity as an Australian.

So the series of lectures established almost sixty years ago was an appropriate honour to his name, and the topics which have been covered, from literature and philosophy to politics and economics, present a remarkable record of the developing interest and scholarship on China in this country. We owe a considerable debt to the founders of this program in the 1930s, and we may hope they would be pleased with the continuing results of their enterprise.

I feel most honoured to have been invited to present the Morrison Lecture for 1990. This lecture will deal with times long ago, but the turmoil of empire and the end of a dynasty are matters that Morrison knew well.

Cao Cao was born in 155 AD, a subject of the dynasty of Later Han. His father, Cao Song, was the adopted son of a eunuch at court, and rose through influence and bribery to the highest position in the imperial bureaucracy. Cao Cao himself occupied a number of middle-range posts at the capital until 189, when the general Dong Zhuo took advantage of a failed coup d'etat and claimed power for himself.

The civil war which followed destroyed the authority of the empire, and for ten years the heart of China was ravaged and ruined by ragged armies of adventurers, in an infinite permutation of alliances and treachery.

From this confusion, Cao Cao emerged in triumph. He established a coherent government with the Emperor as his puppet, and by 200, when he defeated his chief rival in battle by the Yellow River, he was the master of north China.

In 208, however, when Cao Cao sought to extend his control to the south, he was defeated and driven back at the battle of the Red Cliffs, and he never succeeded in breaking the line of the Yangzi. When Cao Cao died in 220, his state of Wei still faced two major rivals: Shu-Han in the west under Liu Bei; and Wu in the south under the Sun family.

Forty years later, the Sima family seized power from Cao Cao's successors and established their own dynasty of Jin, and they conquered Shu and Wu to restore a short-lived unity to the Chinese world. The position, however, was always insecure and after little more than twenty years the empire was divided again, with the north dominated by alien, non-Chinese rulers and peoples. Not until the end of the sixth century did a single state hold sway once more over the civilised world of China.

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At this stage, let me offer some justification for the discussion of events so long ago and dynasties so far away. The heroes of the Three Kingdoms, Cao Cao, his colleagues and his rivals, have a notable place in the traditions of the Chinese people. They are celebrated in poetry and drama, their deeds are recounted in cycles of stories, and the policies and crises of their time have been the centre of intellectual and popular debate in modern China.

In that respect, the romance of the Three Kingdoms holds a place among the Chinese people comparable to the tales of King Arthur, of Charlemagne and his paladins or, still more relevant to the present world, of Richard Lionheart and his Crusaders. And if we consider this last example, and the present events in the Middle East, we can recognise how certain events in the past, whether or not they are adequately recorded or properly understood, can influence our perceptions and actions in the present and the future.

I shall not deal here with the romantic tradition of the Three Kingdoms: I think we can take that as given, and well recognised among those who study the field. But since the Morrison Lectures are concerned to address the ethnography of China, and since the matter of the Three Kingdoms has been a significant strand in Chinese popular culture for almost two thousand years, I ask this question: what is it that has made the history of the Three Kingdoms so special? And since I am basically a historian, I seek to answer that question by discussing the history, the society and the people of that time.

So if we deal with that age as it really was, one question is: why Three Kingdoms? For scholars of recent times, looking back over two thousand years of China, the important pattern is that of the great dynasties, from Han to Tang to Song to Ming to Qing, uniting all under Heaven for centuries at a time, with physical boundaries generally coterminous with the extent of Chinese civilisation.

If, however, we look precisely at the end of Han, we must recognise that the fall of the unified empire was followed by four hundred years of political division: an age as long as the Han dynasty itself. The fall of Han was absolute, and it required a different combination of circumstances for Sui and Tang to restore the unity which had been lost for so long.

Yet there was always a tradition that the civilised world should be reunited. During the last days of Han, there were omens and debates on the succession: after twice twelve generations, the virtue of the imperial Liu clan was ending, and who should take over the government? It was, nonetheless, assumed that government would remain to be taken – no-one expected the whole edifice would break into pieces. There might be a brief period of confusion, but the natural pattern of unity and peace should be restored.

From this point of view the reputation of Cao Cao has suffered: he re-established government in the heart-land of China, but he did not destroy his two chief rivals, and the state which he founded was swiftly subverted and destroyed. As a result, rather than receiving praise for creating a measure of order out of chaos, Cao Cao receives blame for not doing more – and in Confucianist analysis this political failure is explained by a lack of personal virtue. So Cao Cao is painted as cruel and cunning, a brilliant but flawed tyrant, the man against whom the loyal Liu Bei, the brave Guan Yu and the brilliant Zhuge Liang, all men of Shu-Han, could demonstrate their wisdom, nobility and skill.

If, however, we escape from political moralising, and look more objectively at the reality of empire in traditional China, then the picture becomes a little different.

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By the middle of the second century AD, the Han dynasty was bankrupt, not only in economic terms, but socially and politically as well. The economic crisis can be traced at least to the beginning of the first century, in the period after the civil war which brought the destruction of Wang Mang and the restoration of the Liu family under Emperor Guangwu. The new emperor owed his success to the support of great landed families, and these were powerful enough to prevent the central government from enforcing any tight control over their local interests and activities. In a pattern which became the norm for all dynasties of China, the local gentry took control of all recruitment to office in the imperial bureaucracy, and they dominated the workings of government to their own advantage. In Later Han, the obvious example of their power was the failure of the new regime to enforce an effective survey of land tenure – so the gentry maintained their hold on the essential capital of a pre-industrial society; while the central government was deprived of its full share from the resources of the nation.¹

The effect of this initial weakness was compounded by mistaken military ambition. At the end of the first century, in two remarkable series of campaigns, Dou Xian destroyed the state of the Northern Xiongnu in present-day Mongolia, and Ban Chao re-established Chinese authority over central Asia, present-day Xinjiang. Both generals had close connection to the court, each of their achievements has been praised by nationalist Chinese commentators, and the combined effect of their success was imperial disaster.

In strategic terms, the destruction of the stable and controllable state of the Xiongnu left a political vacuum along the northern frontier of the empire: and that vacuum was swiftly filled by the disorganised but aggressive tribes of the Xianbi. Further to the west, the continued control of central Asia proved to be beyond the resources of the Chinese government; but as rebellion broke out and the troops were ordered home the uncertainty and the loss of prestige brought mutinies and revolt. In particular, from 107 to 118, the northwest of China was devastated by the rebellion of the non-Chinese Qiang people. The process continued, and by the middle of the second century the north and northwest of China was either outside the control of the imperial government or was under constant and destabilising attack from beyond the frontier.

In traditional interpretation, it is the rulers of the second and third centuries who are blamed for allowing the northern part of China to fall into the hands of "barbarians": it is my contention that the depopulation and withdrawal which allowed this to happen was a direct consequence of the excessive and costly aggression by Dou Xian and Ban Chao.²

¹ See, for example, Patricia Ebrey, "The Economic and Social History of Later Han", in John K. Fairbank and Denis Twitchett [general editors], *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume I [edited by Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe], *The Ch'in and Han Empires*, Cambridge UP 1986 [hereafter *Cambridge China I*], 619-626. Cho-yun Hsu, *Han Agriculture: The Formation of Early Chinese Agrarian Economy*, University of Washington, Seattle 1980, 210-211, cites several instances of officials being punished by Emperor Guangwu for presenting false or inadequate returns but, as Hans Bielenstein, *The Restoration of the Han Dynasty* [RHD] 4, in *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* [BMFEA] LI, 136-137, and Ch'ü T'ung-tsu, *Han Social Structure*, University of Washington, Seattle 1980, 203-204, observe, there is evidence that corruption continued, and the government of Later Han made no effective effort to control the amount of landed property held by any one family.

² See de Crespigny, *Northern Frontier*, Canberra 1984, 89-91, 125, 264-276, and 417-437. Cf. Bielenstein, RHD 3 in *BMFEA* XXXIX, 129-130, and Yü Ying-shih, "Han Foreign Relations", in *Cambridge China I*, 402-403 and 415-416.

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The military misfortunes I have described had serious consequences for the government of Later Han. Immediately, the cost of the wars put direct strain upon the central budget. In the longer term, the loss of resources from the devastated territories, particularly in the northwest, meant that shortfall in taxation quotas had to be sought elsewhere, notably from the settled and prosperous Yellow plain. Inevitably, this produced two results: the weakened central government was unable to enforce its requirements against the entrenched interests of the local gentry; and the very attempt to do so caused resentment and disruption.

At the imperial capital, Luoyang, there was another, political, development. Throughout the dynasty one emperor after another had been expected, and often required, to take as his chief consort a woman from one of the great families of the empire, and the male members of her family always held high authority at court. The "usurper" Wang Mang, who seized power from Former Han, had based his position upon that relationship; the energetic generals Dou Xian and Ban Chao were imperial relatives by marriage; at the beginning of the second century the Empress-Dowager Deng and her clan had controlled the court; and they in turn were succeeded by the Liang family. Each group sought to maintain itself by sexual politics in the harem and by intrigue at court, but each in turn was overthrown after one or two generations. On occasion, the emperor played the chief role in ridding himself of these over-mighty subjects and their unwanted tutelage, but he was compelled to rely increasingly upon support from the eunuchs of his harem. Formally appointed as guardians and jailers of the women, their proximity to the ruler gave them opportunity to act first as messengers and then as trusted agents.

In 159, when Emperor Huan destroyed the Liang family, he relied almost entirely upon the support of the eunuchs. Notably, moreover, he received no useful assistance from the full men of the gentry who held office in the court and the government, for they were generally either intimidated by the power of the Liang family, or respected them as leading members of their own class.³ For the remaining ten years of his reign Emperor Huan continued to rely upon the eunuchs and their associates, promoted them in his service and sought to establish their position in the empire at large. When he died in 168, the gentry officials hoped for better things under the new regent Dou Wu, whose daughter as Empress had been forced onto Emperor Huan against his will. A few months later, however, the eunuchs ran a coup against Dou Wu and his supporters, they obtained the support of the imperial guard regiments, they seized control of government under the young Emperor Ling, and they held that power for the next twenty years.

The period of Liang family hegemony had seen the development of one group of gentry opposition. Described by themselves as "Pure", and known by their later fate as the Proscribed Faction, these men sought to maintain an ideal Confucianist morality in opposition to the corruption of government dominated by powerful politicians. Most of the leaders and heroes of this group came from the middle and lower gentry, and they were energetically supported by students of the imperial university, thirty thousand

³ See, for example, de Crespigny, *Emperor Huan and Emperor Ling I*, 11-13. On the status of consort families in Later Han, see Ch'ü, *Han Social Structure*, 210-211, and de Crespigny, "Political Protest in Imperial China: the Great Proscription of Later Han, 167-184", in *Papers on Far Eastern History* 11, Canberra 1975, 1-36, at 4-5 note 1: cf. Yang Lien-sheng, *Dong Han de haozu*, in *The Tsing Hua Journal* 11 (1936), 1007-63, translated as "Landed Nobility of the Eastern Han Dynasty" in E-tu Zen Sun and John DeFrancis, *Chinese Social History: Translations of Selected Studies*, Washington 1956, 103-134, at 1042/122, and Etienne Balazs, "La crise sociale et la philosophie politique à la fin des Han", in *T'oung Pao* XXXIX (1949-50), 83-131, translated by H.M. Wright, *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy: Variations on a Theme*, Yale UP 1964, 187-225 at 84/188-189.

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strong, who chanted slogans and scrawled graffiti about the streets and walls of the capital. Sadly, however, like other ideal moralists in later times, the Pure men were more ready to criticise those who held power than to offer any practical alternative to the problems of government, and they were readily led to support "reformers" who were primarily concerned with their own selfish interests. They played no part in the destruction of the Liang, and they turned their disapproval with equal and indeed greater censure against the government of Emperor Huan and his eunuch favourites.⁴

In 166, after several years of skirmishing with propaganda, the eunuchs persuaded their master to exile the leaders of this group from office. The men of faction rose to brief power as supporters of Dou Wu, but when the eunuchs regained power in 168 they confirmed their success by a purge and proscription of their enemies, and the ban was maintained for the next fifteen years.

The troubles at the capital were unsettling enough in themselves, for an impoverished administration, whose government is punctuated by coups d'etat, is no recipe for imperial success. In more general terms, however, the conflict between gentry Confucianists and imperial clients within Luoyang brought a lack of sympathy and loss of allegiance throughout the whole of China. It can readily be argued that the Pure men of the Proscribed Party were blinkered in their approach to the problems of government, and were concerned for the most part with the limited interests of their own class and background, but they were well armed with the moral courage of their convictions, and the spectacle of their executions and persecution drove a brutal wedge between the imperial government and the leading group which should support the regime. Already, along the frontier, the empire maintained a position only at the cost of misery and disruption to the subjects it should protect. Now, within the country, the perceived moral failures of the various regimes made men of good will and good family reject an official career.⁵ And in many respects, this withdrawal from responsibility was more serious for the fortunes of the dynasty than any feuds, quarrels and proscriptions at the capital. The final, fatal weakness of Han was the loss of faith among the scholars and gentlemen who should have given their chief support.

Increasingly, in the provinces, as men sought their own advantage through private arrangements, the network of commendation, patronage, and alliance, already established among local families, developed and grew. Beside and below the official administration, which they dominated through their influence in the bureaucracy, leaders of the gentry maintained a network of tenants, retainers and clients, oppressing and robbing their poorer neighbours, and contending with one another for local influence and power.

Moreover, for this conservative, politically stagnant society of the provinces, the threat posed by the arrival of new men from the capital, eunuchs and their supporters seeking position in the country for themselves, was a major source of conflict. Though not on a large scale, the struggles were fierce and cruel on both sides:

In one instance, a eunuch associate sought to marry the daughter of a leading local gentleman. The request was refused, and so the frustrated suitor led a band of followers to attack the neighbouring property, kidnapped the unfortunate girl, had her tied to a stake in his courtyard, and amused himself by shooting arrows at her till she died.

⁴ de Crespigny, "Political Protest in Imperial China", and *Emperor Huan and Emperor Ling* I, 69-85 and 101.

⁵ On this development, see de Crespigny, "Politics and Philosophy under the Government of Emperor Huan 159-168 AD", in *T'oung Pao* LXVI (1980), 41-83 at 51-56: "Good men do nothing".

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In response, the local magistrate arrested, tortured and killed the ringleader and all his dependents, without regard to guilt, innocence, age or sex.⁶

Amongst themselves, these gentlemen could be equally vicious:

The father of Su Buwei was killed in a personal quarrel by Li Gao, who later became a minister at court. Su Buwei found an opportunity to tunnel into the minister's residence by night and came to his bedroom.

At that moment, Li Gao had got up to go to the lavatory, so Su Buwei contented himself by murdering Li Gao's concubine and his infant son. He then escaped to his home country, dug up the corpse of Li Gao's father from its tomb, and took the head as an offering to his own father's grave.

Li Gao is said to have died of grief and shame, but some time later Su Buwei himself, and sixty members of his household, were killed in revenge by a friend of Li Gao.

In moral comment upon this unhappy history, leaders of the Pure faction admired the manner in which Su Buwei had maintained his vendetta single-handed against official odds.⁷

Such incidents as these may have been exceptional, but an almanac for the proprietors of great estates suggests that the third month is the time to prepare security measures against thieves who may appear during the food shortages of spring, and in the ninth month the family should repair its weapons and practise military skills, to be ready for the attacks of bandits driven by the misery of the coming winter.⁸

Seen against this background, the tomb models of Later Han take a new meaning: those charming towers above the farmyard are built for serious defence in time of troubles, like the castles of Japan or medieval Europe. And there are general indications that whereas in Qin and Former Han the wealthy tombs, and the multitudes of model warriors, were reserved to members of the imperial house, by Later Han the grave goods, and the warriors, were used by local officials and the leaders of clans. The items are not of such high quality, but they are more widely spread, both in space across the provinces of China and in rank amongst the members of the gentry. If a man took soldiers with him to guard his grave, we may assume he had retained such services during his life, and it seems very possible that the devolution of luxury and the symbols of power among the dead reflects a living wealth and a real independence of local interests against the now limited authority of the imperial government.

Indeed it was a nice question whether the dynasty was maintained with the support of the landed gentry and the officials, or rather for their benefit. To a considerable degree, the attitude of scholars and the men of good family was one of pious moralising against the imperial government, combined with a benevolent sympathy, largely unaccompanied by practical action, for those who were poorer and weaker. And the leaders of the Pure faction, though they were men of great honour and tragic courage, can also be regarded as the short-sighted representatives of a selfish landlord class, primarily concerned with its personal interests, and unable or unwilling to look beyond to the dangers which threatened society as a whole.

Certainly, for the common people of China, such conflicts among their betters brought little interest and no advantage: both sides were contending for the right to exploit

⁶ Fan Ye, *Hou Han shu*, Beijing (Zhonghua shuju) 1965 [HHS] 78/68, 2521-22.

⁷ HHS 31/21, 1107-09; de Crespigny, *Emperor Huan and Emperor Ling I*, 127-128.

⁸ Cui Shi, *Simin yueling*, C.7 and I.1, translated in Hsu, *Han Agriculture*, 220 and 225.

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the labour of the subsistence farmers who comprised more than ninety per cent of the population and produced almost all of the nation's wealth. In the long term, moreover, the continued weakness of central government meant that powerful local families could evade their quotas for taxation and pass the cost onto their tenants or their poorer neighbours, while the benefits which government should provide, assistance in time of famine, a measure of good order, and a sense of security, were steadily disregarded.

In 184, first year of a new cycle in the calendar, the religious leader Zhang Jue, who had established wide popularity through faith-healing and the preaching of a new utopia, led a mass uprising across all north China. His followers wore yellow scarves about their heads, and they fought for a coming era of Great Peace [*Taiping*]. The rebellion of the Yellow Turbans, however, was essentially a peasant movement, and it was broken within the year. Whatever their discontent with the regime at the capital, the great local families were equally concerned to destroy their enemies below. There was no substantial support for the rebels among the gentry, and the bulk of the imperial armies were raised in regiments based upon family retainers and local leadership: despite the promise of a better world, the greater part of the people preferred the traditional relationship of servant and master to the abstract opportunity of escape from class oppression.⁹

The immediate result of the uprising was the slaughter of great numbers of people, the devastation of formerly prosperous regions, a vast increase in lawlessness and banditry, and an exhaustion of government. The formal structures of the state remained, but the erosion of authority was almost complete, and the basis for civil war had been prepared. The facade of Han relied only upon general acceptance of the imperial legitimacy – and a reluctance to contemplate what alternatives might take its place.

In 189 the death of Emperor Ling renewed the conflict between eunuchs and regular officials. In bloody and ruinous fighting, each side destroyed the other, and on the evening of 24 September, as flames from the imperial palace lit up the sky, the frontier general Dong Zhuo came to take over the capital and put his own nominee, the younger son of Emperor Ling, upon the throne.

Dong Zhuo did not hold power for very long, but the way he had gained it and the way that he used it meant the end of legitimate government in the empire. He had no good right to be in the capital at all, he held his power solely because he was the man in command of the army, and only another army could remove him. The leaders of the provinces took up arms to oppose him, and they recruited their armies as they had against the Yellow Turbans, on a nucleus of local family forces and a press-ganged conscription.

The "loyal alliance" lasted no more than a few months, and for the next ten years, as disorder spread across China, the former structures of power were wiped away. At the beginning, armies were based upon traditional and local family loyalties, but there rapidly emerged a distinction between those whose hereditary position allowed them to command such forces, and the men who could take real advantage of such opportunity. It was one thing for a gentleman to use his retainers in a feud or bullying against his neighbours; it was quite a different matter when such clan leaders came face to face with competent fighting men. One after another, in every region of China, the amateurs

⁹ Some scholars have sought to demonstrate an association between the gentry members of the Proscribed Party and the rebels of the Yellow Turbans. From my own reading of the texts, however, I have so far found the evidence for such a proposition to be tenuous, and the arguments less than convincing.

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succumbed to the professionals, and the leaders of great lineage fell victim to the men from the margin.

The career of Cao Cao is a model of this process in action. His family background is uncertain, he and his father owed their position at court to their connection with the eunuchs, and despite their rank they were not in the same class as the men of great family. Cao Cao held minor military command against the Yellow Turbans, but it was only in 190, at the age of thirty-five, that he took an independent position. His first small army, like the others, was based upon private resources, but Cao Cao showed an ability and imagination that raised him rapidly from the common ruck. In the early years, moreover, though he suffered some substantial defeats, he showed an exceptional ability to retain the loyalty of his officers and of the soldiers under his command, and he gradually developed a warlord state in the territory south of the Yellow River.

By the middle 190s, from this small but secure base, Cao Cao achieved two remarkable successes. Firstly, he took control of the young emperor Xian, maintaining him as a puppet to legitimate his personal power. Second, still more important, Cao Cao established a system of military agricultural colonies, which resettled peasants dispossessed by war onto fields that others had abandoned. The new tenants were allocated land under direct control of the government, without intervention from the former landlords: and in ready exchange they defended their territory and produced reliable supplies for armies further afield. None of his rivals were willing or able to match this administrative coup, and the power of his state grew without interruption. In 200, at the battle of Guandu just south of the Yellow River, Cao Cao destroyed the army of his greatest enemy, Yuan Shao, and in the following years he took over all of north China from the Great Wall to the Huai and the Han.

In 208, however, as Cao Cao sought to take control of the middle Yangzi, his initial success was halted at the Red Cliffs near present-day Wuhan. The engagement itself was not a major one, but the tactical setback had great strategic consequences, for the armies of the south, notably the forces of Wu under Sun Quan, were able to maintain defences on the line of the Yangzi for more than seventy years thereafter, and this success established the foundations for the future division of China into Northern and Southern dynasties.

In immediate terms, there were several reasons why Cao Cao failed at the Red Cliffs. For one thing, he was not fully committed to success. His own army had been on active service for several years, and was barely returned from a triumphant campaign north of the Great Wall. His initial thrust had secured the basin of the Han River, and it appears most likely that his further advance was made rather in the hope of swift success against weak and divided enemies than in the determination to embark on a thorough conquest. Once he had suffered a setback it was better policy to return and secure the government of his base territory than to continue and perhaps over-commit himself too far from home. There should always be another opportunity.¹⁰

In fact, the opportunity never came: though the armies of Wei, under Cao Cao and his successors, repeatedly attacked the line of the middle and lower Yangzi, they never obtained a position in the south. In part, this lack of success can be ascribed to the obstacle of the great river and the difficulty of organising major amphibious operations over such

¹⁰ The campaign is discussed in de Crespigny, *Generals of the South: the foundation and early history of the Three Kingdoms state of Wu*, Canberra 1990, 263-275.

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a distance. Besides this, however, it is evident that Chinese colonisation and control in the south was now sufficient to support a separate state.

During Later Han, through the first and second centuries AD, the registered population of China south of the Yangzi had more than doubled, both in simple numbers and as a proportion of the empire as a whole, from seven to fifteen per cent. The increase came largely through migration, as men sought to escape from the troubles and oppression of the north, and it was confirmed by settlement of agricultural land and by intermarriage with the people of the south. Often enough, this steady incursion had been resisted by the earlier inhabitants, who saw themselves driven from their lands by the new settlers, but these occasional "rebellions" were put down by local or imperial armies, and the expansion of the Chinese people at the expense of their neighbours was maintained, as for the following two thousand years, without great difficulty.

This spread of Chinese power meant that, once he had been able to secure a short-term frontier along the Yangzi, the government of Sun Quan was able to confirm that defence line with men, ships and fortifications. Moreover, the state of Wu then embarked upon a program of conquest and colonisation through its southern territories, forcing more people, both Han and non-Chinese, into its service, and turning these human resources into defence against the north. In this respect, the southern expansion of Chinese culture created and confirmed the division of the Chinese world.¹¹

In other directions, Cao Cao and his successors were able to take over the territory formerly controlled by Han in Manchuria and northern Korea, and they re-established contact with dependent states in central Asia. It was not possible, however, to restore the Chinese position along the northern frontier, for that land had been lost and abandoned by the government of Han: all that could be done was to recognise a number of petty chieftains and seek to keep them under some control, and it was from that region, notably present-day Shanxi, that the non-Chinese dynasties developed their power in the following century.

Finally, to the west in present-day Sichuan, the warlord adventurer Liu Bei, his minister Zhuge Liang, and their local successors concentrated their energies on military aggression against Wei. Their efforts were ineffectual, and beyond the strength of a single province, but the state of Shu-Han survived for more than fifty years primarily because the power of the north could not be concentrated in that direction so long as there was an active threat across the Yangzi from the south. Only after the death of Sun Quan, when the government of Wu was demoralised by succession struggles, could the new dynasty of Jin concentrate against Shu-Han and then turn to conquer the south.

Cao Cao died in 220 as a formal subject of Han, and the dynasty was not ended until the enforced abdication of Emperor Xian in favour of his son Cao Pi at the end of that year. By that time, however, the frontiers of the Three Kingdoms, Wei, Shu-Han and Wu, had been established by thirty years of war, and the pattern of their conflict had been largely determined by the developments of previous centuries. Of these the most important were the weakness in the north, due to the over-expansion by Later Han against the Xiongnu, and the strength of the south, brought by a steady, now accelerated, colonisation south of the Yangzi.

¹¹ This colonisation is discussed in de Crespigny, *Generals of the South*, particularly at 68-69 and 475-478.

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It would be sadly dull, however, if all such history should be explained merely in terms of geography, demography and economics, and indeed it would be wrong to try to do so. Within the pattern of their time, Cao Cao, his associates and rivals made their way by individual achievement, and this is the real and human story of the Three Kingdoms.

Firstly, we should recognise again the degree to which the old regime of the Han was destroyed in the first years of civil war. The authority of the government at the capital, already shaken by the internal quarrels and the rivalries of the eunuchs and their opponents, had been completely eliminated by the usurpation of Dong Zhuo, and the emperor himself became no more than a pawn in the politics of the warlords. And at the same time, during this fight to the finish, the traditional power structure of the provinces, based upon hereditary control by great landed families, was utterly destroyed.

Yuan Shao, last great rival of Cao Cao in the north, is a notable example of the gentlemen who had held influence under Han and whose power was destroyed in the civil war. The Yuan family had held the highest offices of state for generations and their network of allies and clients extended across the empire. Yuan Shao had played a leading role against the eunuchs and when the alliance was formed against Dong Zhuo he was swiftly elected as leader. The influence and prestige of his family, and the military power which he acquired upon that basis, were sufficient to overwhelm his neighbours north of the Yellow River, and until he encountered Cao Cao face to face he had met no substantial setback. The defeat at Guandu in 200, however, was more than a tactical misfortune, for Yuan Shao's main army disintegrated, and he was never able to return to the attack. Yuan Shao died soon afterwards, his sons quarrelled amongst themselves, and they died landless in exile.

The matter of controlling and maintaining an army in being was central to the success of Cao Cao and the failure of Yuan Shao. For the armies of this time were ramshackle affairs. The small regular forces of the Han dynasty, professional soldiers based at the capital and experienced troops on the northern frontier, had been well-disciplined and efficient, but elsewhere in the empire the government of Later Han had been more concerned about the loyalty of its people than with the need for competent soldiers, and it maintained no general system of militia training. In civil war, as the mobilisations of the warlords brought vast numbers to the competing banners, there were neither time nor resources for proper training. Many men with experience in the old imperial army gained advancement as commanders of the new recruits, but their units were overwhelmed by the hordes of newcomers, and the traditions, skills and discipline were lost. As for equipment, uniforms, supply and general co-ordination, the texts indicate either that they were completely lacking or, when they were present, that this was considered exceptional.

In reality, these armies were simple armed mobs, with landless troops driven variously by loyalty or fear, by personal desperation, and by the hope of plunder. And they were accompanied by a mass of camp-followers – women and children, cooks and prostitutes, peddlers and gamblers, and a few who specialised in care of the sick and wounded. In the ruin of the society of the past, these masses of ragged misery joined the command of any chieftain who might gain them a measure of security.

So the structure and fighting techniques of these armies were based upon small groups of men following individual leaders. The heart of each unit was the commander himself, supported by his Companions, skilled soldiers who owed him personal allegiance and served as a body-guard, and the most important tactic was expressed in the phrase "to break the enemy line". In aggressive action, the commander and his Companions acted as spearhead for a drive at the enemy array, and if they were successful

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they could hope to be followed by the mass of their followers, spreading out to attack the broken enemy from the flank and the rear.

Such tactics have been used at other times and places, and the reliance upon mass, concentrated at one point, is a natural technique for an ill-disciplined force, but it is a frightening operation for the leaders of a primitive army, with no certainty of support. Such attack requires great courage from the leader and his immediate followers, and a high level of personal authority to attract his men to follow in the charge. So if we read in the stories how one man held a bridge, or another advanced alone against an army, some part of the tale may be true:

Here, for example, is an attack from the Yangzi against the mouth of the Han in 208:¹²

Two great ships were moored to narrow the entrance, with heavy ropes stretched between them and stones attached as anchors. Above this line of defence were a thousand men with crossbows for covering fire. The arrows poured down like rain, and the army could not get forward.

Dong Xi and Ling Tong were together in the van. Each took charge of a forlorn hope of volunteers, all in double armour. They boarded a great barge, charged between the covered boats, and Dong Xi himself cut the ropes with his sword. The enemy craft were swept down-stream, and the main body of the army was able to attack.

For the most part, the new leaders came from lower gentry or comparable background, for they needed access to some group of supporters in order to begin a military career. Sun Jian, father of the first emperor of Wu, was probably the son of a merchant, and he first went to war with a few hundred personal and family followers. Liu Bei, future sovereign of Shu, claimed distant descent from the house of Han, but his father had held only minor office. Like many others, he and his sworn brothers Guan Yu and Zhang Fei came first to prominence in fighting against the Yellow Turbans. Thereafter, at one time or another, and with limited military success, Liu Bei served or allied himself to every major warlord, and his seizure of power in the west came as the natural culmination of a long record of double-dealing. He must have been, however, a man of remarkable quality, for he retained a reputation for honour and generosity, and he attracted and held the loyalty of his followers even in the days of his weakness and apparent failure.

Indeed, at every level, success and survival depended almost entirely upon the leaders' personal quality. Not only did they require the military skill to attack against odds, they also needed the authority and style to attract and hold men in their service and support in battle. And the fighting commanders were men of flamboyant personality, arrogant, luxurious, often quick-witted, frequently brutal, not easy for anyone to deal with:

Gan Ning would kill for pleasure, and he gave outlaws refuge and lodging in his offices. Whenever he went in or out, if he was on land there were horsemen and chariots drawn up in array, and if he travelled by water there were lines of small craft, all with followers in embroidered clothing. Wherever he halted he used a silken

¹² Based on Chen Shou, *Sanguo zhi*, Beijing (Zhonghua shuju) 1959 [SGZ] 55/Wu 10, 1291; de Crespigny, *Generals of the South*, 240.

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rope to moor the boat, and when he moved on again he cut the rope and left it, to show how little he cared.¹³

Pan Zhang was a rough, fierce man, whose orders were always respected. He loved to play a fine part, but he began as an impoverished drunkard: when creditors came to his gate he simply assured them that one day he would be wealthy and powerful, and he would repay them then. Later, when he held command, he would steal for the benefit of his men and on his own account, and if one of his officers or soldiers happened to be well off, he would sometimes kill him and take his property.¹⁴

Zhu Huan, as general of Wu on campaign against Wei, quarrelled bitterly with his commander-in-chief, killed numbers of his attendants, and then "pretended he was insane" and left the army. Sun Quan, however, soothed him down, treated him with honour, and returned him to the front with a largely independent command. Zhu Huan remarked that now he had the opportunity to return to active service, his ailment would cure itself.¹⁵

In this society of war, therefore, there was a new hierarchy of heroes: men of remarkable, often foolhardy, courage and personality – mad, bad and dangerous to know – subject only to those few exceptional rulers who could control their energies and hold their loyalty.

In the great campaigns, those which decided the fortunes of a state, there was a limited, but vital, role for high command. A major force, thirty thousand men or more, occupied a vast area of ground and placed heavy demands on the resources of an even wider territory. It was composed of disparate units with individual leaders, much of whose time was spent in foraging, while poor techniques of communication restricted all attempts at control and manoeuvre. The real requirement was not for a brilliant strategy: the essential thing was to maintain the army in being – and frequently this was more than the generals could manage.

For in these circumstances, the question of morale was a matter of vital moment, and every leader had to recognise that the mass of troops at his command was both brittle and volatile. If either side suffered a reverse, if the defence gave way or an attack was checked, if a notable leader was discomfited or slain, numbers of men would be confused and uncertain, and they could rapidly fall into panic and flight. Inevitably, at some stage, this was going to happen – the important question was whether the commander, at whatever level he was operating, could restore the situation and rally his troops again to his banner.

This was the critical difference between success and failure in the civil war, and in more general terms it provides a measure of the achievement of Cao Cao. Faced with the ruin of Han, with military and political chaos over the whole of China, Cao Cao reconstructed a functioning government and restored a measure of good order across the great part of the empire. Given the nature of the fighting men that he had to deal with, ebullient, fierce and egocentric, he and his rivals Liu Bei, Zhuge Liang and Sun Quan,

¹³ SGZ 55/Wu 10, 1292, commentary of Pei Songzhi quoting the *Wu shu* of Wei Zhao and others; de Crespigny, *Generals of the South*, 517.

¹⁴ SGZ 55/Wu 10, 1300; de Crespigny, *Generals of the South*, 518-519.

¹⁵ SGZ 56/Wu 11, 1314; Achilles Fang, *The Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms*, Harvard UP 1952, I, 551-553.

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can only be admired for their strength of personality and their ability to manage their followers.

I turn to another question: can we say that the unity of empire was more desirable than the opportunities provided by division? For many regions, and notably the south, separation from a central government meant that the wealth of the territory remained to benefit the local people. During Han, the system of the Grand Canal had drained prosperity from the southern frontier to the luxury of Luoyang and its mistaken ambitions in the north. Under Wu, however, the Yangzi was developed as a great trading route between the east and the centre of China, while the profits of trade from the southern seas supported a splendid city at present-day Nanjing, whose culture would rival and complement that of the older centres on the Yellow plain.

Indeed, the splendour of these rival courts, their palaces and their capitals, provided a means for the rulers to impress their subjects. Cao Cao did much to restore the city of Luoyang, but he also expressed his authority by the embellishment of two other capitals, Xuchang and Ye, south and north of the Yellow River. In 210, when he built the Copper Bird Terrace at Ye, his brilliant son Cao Zhi celebrated the construction in impromptu verse:¹⁶

On a pleasure-tour with the brilliant ruler, we climb the storied terrace with feelings of delight;

We see all the palace stretched out below, and we gaze upon the works of wisdom and virtue:

He has raised great gates like rugged hills, he has floated twin turrets into the clouds,
He has built a splendid tower to reach the heavens, he has joined flying bridges to the western walls.

We look down to the long thread of the Zhang River, we look out to the flourishing growth of the orchards;

We lift our heads to the gentle majesty of the spring breeze, and we hear the competing cries of a hundred birds.

The heavenly work is established firm as a wall, the wishes of our house are brought to fulfilment,

Good influence reaches all the world, and every respect and reverence is paid to the capital;

Though the hegemony of the past were magnificent, how can they compare to your wisdom and virtue?

Both the theme and the author symbolize two notable aspects of the state of Wei, for Cao Zhi is admired as one of the greatest poets of China. Cao Cao himself was a man of considerable literary talent, and his eldest son and heir Cao Pi had genuine ability as a composer and scholar of literature. In practical terms, moreover, restoration and embellishment of their cities was the outward sign of legitimacy for the new rulers.

For although Liu Bei in Shu-Han would claim the imperial title in right of the Liu family, the rulers of Wei and Wu had no such concern: their mandate relied upon simple possession of power. The virtue of the rival states could be judged only on the basis of their political and military success, in the restoration of effective government, not upon any claim to ideal moral virtue. The emperors of Han had been criticised with portents – accidents in the heavens or on earth, reported to show how the faults of the ruler were

¹⁶ SGZ 19, 558, commentary of Pei Songzhi quoting the *Wei ji* of Yin Dan.

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disturbing the harmony of the universe¹⁷ – but such charges were of no effect against the new regime. The enemies of Cao Cao slandered him by propaganda, in stories told with relish to this day, but for the time being at least, the complaints of morality were irrelevant, and a reputation for trickery and ruthlessness added awe and imagination to his name.

At the same time, Cao Cao and his sons gathered about them writers, poets and scholars, respected and admired in their own time and in subsequent generations, who gave an intellectual splendour to what need otherwise have been no more than a military government.

The poets of this period, moreover, restored the voice of individuals. For the most part, during Han, literary expression had been concerned primarily with the interests of government and the leaders of society. The splendid rhapsodies of *fu* presented, either in admiration or criticism, the glories of empire, and the lyrics of the *yuefu* described, certainly with sympathy but without personal involvement, the life of the common people. As the security of the past collapsed in ruins, however, Wang Can, Chen Lin, Ruan Yu and other "Masters of the Jianan Period" expressed their sorrows not only for the nation as a whole, but for their own sense of its misery. In a splendid early model of the new style, his "Rhapsody on Climbing a Tower" written in exile to the south, Wang Can alternates the sights and sounds of nature to counterpoint his own sense of loneliness and frustration.¹⁸ Later, when he came to join Cao Cao's court, he and his colleagues, including the young Cao Pi and Cao Zhi, formed friendships which were expressed in poems written one to another. And this sense of personal identity among gentlemen was now expressed in a new style of literature, immensely important to later generations and centuries in the future.

For in this new world, as Cao Cao claimed repeatedly, with all the old patterns of society brought to ruin, individual talent was the one thing essential to success. There was no room for concern about background or personal morality, the only question was ability, whether it be on the field of battle, in council of war, or in the administration of settled territory:

I have never heard that a state could be established and restored when its officials were incompetent and its soldiers would not fight..... In times of peace, we may admire fine virtue, but in time of trouble it is achievement and ability which obtain rewards.

And

So long a man has ability, I can use him.¹⁹

For masses of the people, of course, such opportunity never arose, many of the newcomers had no more than a short-lived career, and some men of lineage were able to maintain and restore their family prosperity for generations to come, but in each case it was the individual who had to seize and seek their own fortune.

¹⁷ See, for example, Bielenstein, "An Interpretation of the Portents in the Ts'ien Han-shu", in *BMFEA* XXII (1950), 127-143, Wolfgang Eberhard, "The Political Function of Astronomy and Astronomers in Han China", in *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, edited by John K. Fairbank, Chicago UP 1957, 33-70, de Crespigny, "Politics and Philosophy", 61-68, and *Portents of Protest in the Later Han Dynasty: the memorials of Hsiang K'ai to Emperor Huan*, Canberra 1976.

¹⁸ *Denglou fu*, in *Wen xuan* 11, translated by Burton Watson, *Chinese Rhymer-Prose*, Columbia UP 1971, 52-60.

¹⁹ From edicts quoted in the Pei Songzhi commentary to *SGZ* 1, 24 and 32, also 44 and 49-50.

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And it was not only in war and government, but also in society and in the life of the mind, that the Three Kingdoms offered a career open to the talents. The imagination and energy of scholars and thinkers were directed not only to politics and literature but also to fields of philosophy which had been largely blocked by the tradition of Han Confucianism. While Buddhism still remained to some extent on the margin, interest in the individual rather than the ideal of society brought a revival of indigenous Chinese thought, centred on the study of the three Mysteries: the Classic of Changes, the *Daode jing* and the Book of Zhuangzi.²⁰

In similar fashion, this freedom of thought and openness of opportunity created one of the few periods in Chinese history when women had the opportunity to influence affairs directly rather than hide behind a screen. The Lady Wu, mother of Sun Quan, played a substantial role in council, and Sun Quan's sister, married to Liu Bei, is said to have dominated his household and terrified her husband with the aid of a personal following of a hundred female attendants, all of them trained in arms. Sun Quan's daughters, in more traditional style, disrupted his court with intrigue, and when one became the mistress of his chief minister she had her sister put to death.

In the north, though Cao Cao acknowledged more than thirty children by different women, he gave his loyalty to the Lady Bian, a former sing-song girl who became Queen and Dowager of Wei. His son and successor Cao Pi, after an impetuous but tragic marriage with the widowed daughter-in-law of Yuan Shao, chose as his empress the Lady Guo, a woman of minor gentry stock who had at one time been a servant. So the imperial family of Wei defied the tradition of Han: they chose their consorts from families which could offer neither support nor rivalry to the throne, and it seems very probable that they held them in genuine affection.

In the longer term, however, the marriage policy of Wei deprived the imperial lineage of prestige and political support. Increasingly, moreover, the former pattern of Han society, dominated by powerful families, emerged again under the ambit of the new empires. Many great clans had been destroyed in civil war, but others submitted to the new rulers and maintained their local position largely intact, while many new men of the conquerors, exposed too greatly to the chances of war and politics, either fell victim themselves or failed to pass on their great position to descendants.

In this way, as the Three Kingdoms stabilised, the rival governments, primarily concerned with intrigue at the capital and problems on the frontiers, were unable to maintain close authority against the local magnates. The apex of government, recorded by the histories with tales of generals and ministers and intrigue at court, rested upon a broad class of village and county gentry, who might accept local office, but who had small concern with the politics of the capital or the fortunes of the state. So the pattern of the last years of Later Han was restored: basic dues were paid to the imperial court, but the details of its activities were largely irrelevant to local power, influence and survival.

Inevitably, moreover, as the rulers became more isolated from their most powerful subjects, the basis of authority was whittled away. Gradually the military units, the civilian administration, and the agricultural colonies of Wei, fell back into hereditary control, while the splendours and imagination of the court and the capital, which had formerly served to enhance the prestige and legitimacy of the new states, became sources

²⁰ See, for example, Etienne Balazs, "Entre révolte nihiliste et evasion mystique. Les courants intellectuels en Chine au III^e siècle de notre ère," in *Etudes asiatiques* 2 (1948), 27-55, translated in *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy*, 226-254, and "Paul Demiéville, "Philosophy and Religion from Han to Sui", in *Cambridge China* 1, 828-832.

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of resentment and disapproval. The power of government, heart of Cao Cao's reconstruction of the state, was steadily eroded to the advantage of local interests and the power of great families.

As a result of this process, when the Sima family seized power in Wei, they obtained support as representatives of the great clans against the Cao. In practice, the opponents of the imperial state sought their own interests, but they identified those interests with a true morality, and they regarded themselves as men of traditional "Confucian" virtue, contending against authoritarian "Legalist" principles and the absurd excesses of philosophical speculation: the policies of the Sima echoed real concern for a structure of power which would give proper respect to gentlemen of quality and substance.

In this respect, one essential aspect of the Three Kingdoms was a struggle between two forms of political society. On one side was the gentry-bureaucratic tradition of Han, which had successfully defied the imperial government and dominated the state with a structure of family and clan linkage, of alliances and clients, networks of *guanxi* connections and a local hierarchy of oppression and control. On the other side was the structure by which Cao Cao and his associates had attempted to restore order from the chaos of the second century: a powerful, authoritative government, with political and social status determined by individual ability rather than by inherited position.²¹

That model, however, was too fragmented and brittle to survive for long against the self-interested alliance of the great lineages, and the people who might have benefited from such a structure were either too selfish to maintain it or too anxious to seek security as allies and clients of the hereditary chieftains. The Chinese reverted very quickly to the traditional structure, and the power of class and clan remained the backbone of government, not only in the centuries of division, but also in the great dynastic empires which followed.

So I suggest this is one reason why tales of the Three Kingdoms have remained so strongly embedded in the popular culture of China: beside the excitement and imagination of the stories themselves, there is the memory of one brief moment when some individuals could seize their opportunities and break through the barriers of class and clan.

Cao Cao, indeed, was a model of the process. When he was young, a celebrated judge of character described him as:

A bad subject in time of peace, a hero in time of trouble.²²

As a man of character and enterprise, he would have remained restricted and frustrated in an organised society. It was the ruin of empire which brought opportunity, and he and his fellows were no longer small fish in a well-controlled pond, but dragons in mighty waters.

It was a moment of personal liberty which was not maintained, but the legend has been admired by the oppressed of every generation since that time, and the heroes of that age have been taken as examples of those who controlled their own destiny.

²¹ In this dichotomy, one may find echoes of the contrast proposed by Loewe between "Modernists" and "Reformists" during Qin and Former Han. See the Introduction to his *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, London 1974, 11-13, and *Cambridge China I*, 104-105 and 488-489.

²² HHS 68/58, 2234. [Cf. the version given by the *Yitong zazhi* of Sun Sheng, quoted in the Pei Songzhi commentary to *SGZ* 1, 3].

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As Cao Cao said in one of his poems,²³ despite the difficulties and miseries of war,
The swift steed in old age may rest in his stable,
But he still thinks of a thousand *li* journey;
When a hero comes to the end of his days,
Strong heart remains the same.
The time of our life and death
Is more than the whim of Heaven;
If a man is in harmony with himself
He may live for long years.
And, in continuing chorus:
Fortune indeed has come;
And singing expresses our hopes.
So if it is asked: Why should we be concerned with the history of men and events so long ago? I suggest, with appropriate caution, three strands for an answer: the literary style is better; the bloodshed is further away; but the lessons are as enduring as the people of China.

²³ From *Bu chu Xiamen xing*, in *Wei Wudi Wei Wendi shi zhu* [Poems by Cao Cao and Cao Pi; with commentary by Huang Jie], Beijing 1958, 26-29; de Crespigny, *Northern Frontier*, 414.