



**A Contribution to the Study on *Sanguo Yanyi* 三國演義  
Its Political Standpoint, Character Evaluation,  
and Character Development**

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*This is a study of the Sanguo yanyi (hereafter simply Yanyi), one of the four great literary classics of China, in terms of its political standpoint, character evaluation, and character development. It questions the traditional views related to the revering Liu Bei 劉備 and belittling Cao Cao 曹操 stance of Yanyi. The argument here is that the novel's political standpoint is mainly based on zhongyi 忠義 (loyalty and righteousness), rather than lineage, benevolence, and other factors. Although Yanyi has a clear political position, it is relatively objective and neutral in evaluating historical figures from different camps. The character development of Yanyi is very successful. The character images are round and rich, rather than flat and stereotypical. Both positive and negative characters have their merits and weaknesses.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Sanguo Yanyi, political standpoint, zhongyi, character evaluation, character development*

## ABBREVIATIONS:

*CQZZZY* *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義

*SGYY* *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義

*SGZ* *Sanguo zhi* 三國志

*SJ* *Shiji* 史記

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## INTRODUCTION

*Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義 (hereafter *Yanyi*)<sup>1</sup> is one of the four great literary classics<sup>2</sup> and is widely regarded as the best history novel of China. The work describes a variety of famous historical figures and events spanning approximately one hundred years between late Eastern Han and early Western Jin. The characters and stories described in it are very popular in China. *Sanguo* thus had become the most

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<sup>1</sup> *Sanguo* 三國 is an ancient China historical period between Eastern Han and Western Jin when Tianxia 天下 (the known civilized world in ancient China) was divided into three states: Wei 魏 (220–265 C.E.), Shu-Han 蜀漢 (221–263 C.E.), and Wu 吳 (228–280 C.E.). The actual and precise years here are a matter of debate. The four most popular versions are 184, 190, 208, and 220 C.E. to 280 C.E. respectively. *Yanyi* usually refers to a historical novel based on actual historical figures and events, including, however, a certain amount of fiction in its contents.

<sup>2</sup> Besides *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢, *Xiyou ji* 西遊記, and *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳.

well-known historical period for Chinese. Its acknowledged author is Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中, who lived between the late Yuan and early Ming period. *Yanyi* has several versions, the most popular of which is the Mao 毛 edition, which was edited by Mao Lun 毛綸 (17<sup>th</sup> century) and his son Mao Zonggang 毛宗崗 (1632–1709) in the reign of Kangxi 康熙 (1662-1722).<sup>3</sup> This article studies *Sanguo yanyi* based on the Mao edition in terms of its political standpoint, character evaluation, and character development.

## POLITICAL STANDPOINT

After the fall of Han, the monarchs of Wei, Shu-Han, and Wu all claimed themselves as the legitimate successors of Han and gave themselves the title Huangdi 皇帝.<sup>4</sup> The debate on which regime was the legitimate succession of Han lasts for nearly two millennia. In *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (hereafter *SGZ*), an official history book written by

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<sup>3</sup> Zheng Zhenduo thought that, compared to the earliest extant edition, the Jiajing 嘉靖 edition, the Mao edition had only made minor modifications (Zheng Zhenduo 1998, vol. 4, p. 208). However, some other scholars like Xu Zhongwei and Zhou Zhaoxin, relying on solid evidences, argued that in the Mao edition, the stance of revering Liu and belittling Cao is much clearer than the Jiajing edition. See Xu Zhongwei 1983; Zhou Zhaoxin 1990, p. 103-105.

<sup>4</sup> In the Zhou dynasty, Wang 王 was the highest title exclusively used by Tianzi 天子, the master of Tianxia. In ancient times, it was infeasible for Tianzi to directly rule the whole of Tianxia. Therefore, Tianzi divided it into many pieces. The largest and best piece, under the direct rule of Tianzi, was called *wangji* 王畿 (Wang's field). The other pieces were called states (*guo* 國), which were granted to *zhuhous* 諸侯. A *zhuhou* was the monarch of a state. However, with the decline of Zhou Tianzi's authority and power, more and more *zhuhou* titled themselves Wang. After Qin reunited Tianxia in B.C.E. 221, because the title of Wang had been abused, Qin Wang Zheng 秦王政 (r. 247–210 C.E.) created a new title for himself: *huangdi*. Since then, Huangdi became the highest title and Wang became a lower one.

Chen Shou 陳壽 (233 – 297 C.E.) about the Sanguo era, Wei is regarded as the legitimate dynasty that succeeded Han. Hence only the Wei monarchs are called Di or Tianzi while the monarchs of Shu-Han and Wu are called Zhu 主, a less honorable form of address. Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019-1086), the editor-in-chief of *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑒 held a neutral view on this issue. He thought that Wei, Shu-Han, and Wu were “equal states” (*lie guo* 列國) and argued: “How can [we] simply honor and praise one regime, regard it as legitimate but all the others as illegitimate!”<sup>5</sup> Anne E. McLaren believed that the Southern Song period “was a turning point in understandings of the Sanguo era”.<sup>6</sup> Since then, Shu-Han being the legitimate succession gradually became the prevailing view, which affected the political stance of *Yanyi*: revering Liu Bei 劉備 and belittling Cao Cao 曹操.<sup>7</sup> In late 1950s, Chinese revisionist historians started to defend Cao Cao 曹操 by arguing that his image is distorted in *Yanyi*. In the debate, an explanation for the novel’s stance of revering Liu and belittling Cao refers to the key notion of “legitimacy” (*zhengtong* 正統), which is related to lineage.<sup>8</sup> This view once predominated in Chinese academia, but has been questioned from the 1980s on.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 豈得獨尊獎一國謂之正統，而其餘皆為僭偽哉！*Zizhi tongjian*, 69.2231.

<sup>6</sup> McLaren 2012, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> Liu Bei (161–223 C.E.) was the founding Huangdi of Shu-Han and Cao Cao (155–220 C.E.) was the founding Wang of Wei.

<sup>8</sup> Guo Moruo questioned *Yanyi* by saying: “Why could only a man with the family name of Liu be Huangdi?” (為什麼一定要姓劉的才能做皇帝？), see Guo Moruo 1959, cited in Zhou Zhaoxin 1990, pp. 94). Jian Bozan said that the author of *Yanyi* deliberately distorted history to propagate the view of legitimacy (Jian Bozan 1959, cited in Zhou Zhaoxin 1990, pp. 95).

<sup>9</sup> Li Houji argued that the stance of revering Liu and belittling Cao is not the base of the author’s conception and

Undoubtedly, *Yanyi* does have a very clear political standpoint of revering Liu and belittling Cao. Readers can easily find it by simply observing the chapter titles even without reading the actual contents. For example, the title of chapter 80 is “Cao Pi 曹丕<sup>10</sup> deposes Di 帝<sup>11</sup> and usurps [Tianxia from] Yan-Liu 炎劉;<sup>12</sup> Han Wang 漢王<sup>13</sup> succeeds to the position of Tianzi”.<sup>14</sup> The political attitude of this novel can also be clearly reflected by the forms of address used in it. *Yanyi* directly calls Cao Cao and Cao Pi by their *ming* 名,<sup>15</sup> Cao and Pi, even after they are titled Wei Wang 魏王 and

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creation of *Yanyi* (Li Houji 1982). Zhou Zhaoxin considered that the position of revering Liu and legitimacy are two separate issues (Zhou Zhaoxin 1990, p. 98). Zhou Jialu also argued that legitimacy is not the reason for *Yanyi* to support Liu Bei (Zhou Jialu [1991], p. 48). Shen Bojun thought that the reason for Liu Bei to be respected “is not simply because Liu Bei’s family name is Liu” (並非簡單地因為劉備姓劉) (Shen Bojun 2011, p. 83).

<sup>10</sup> Cao Pi (r. 220–226 C.E.) was Cao Cao’s son and the first Huangdi of Wei.

<sup>11</sup> Di is the shorter form of Huangdi. Here, it refers to the last Tianzi of Eastern Han: Xiaoxian Huangdi 孝獻皇帝 Liu Xie 劉協 (r. 189–220 C.E.). Xiaoxian is his *shihao* 諡號 (a nobleperson’s posthumous title in principle based on what that person did during his lifetime) conferred by Wei. His *shihao* conferred by Shu-Han is Xiaomin 孝潛. However, Xiao-Xian is usually used by late generations.

<sup>12</sup> Yan-Liu refers to the Han dynasty. The *wuxing* 五行 philosophy of ancient China believes that the physical world consists of five basic elements: *jin* 金 (metal), *mu* 木 (wood), *shui* 水 (water), *huo* 火 (fire), and *tu* 土 (earth). The relationships between them are “mutual generation” (*xiangsheng* 相生) and “mutual overcoming” (*xiangke* 相克). The philosophy of *wuxing* was used to explain a wide range of phenomena, including the change of dynasties. Each dynasty represents the *de* 德 (virtue) of one of the five elements. The Han dynasty was regarded as *huode* 火德 (virtue of fire). Yan means “flame”, and Liu is the family name of the Han royal house, so that Yan-Liu is used to refer to the Han dynasty.

<sup>13</sup> Han Wang refers to Liu Bei, whose title of nobility before Huangdi was Hanzhong Wang 漢中王. Here, Han Wang is used as a shorter form of Hanzhong Wang.

<sup>14</sup> 曹丕廢帝篡炎劉 漢王正位續大統, Luo Guanzhong, *Sanguo yanyi* (hereafter *SGYY*), 80.683.

<sup>15</sup> In traditional China, a man with a certain social position usually has two given names: *ming* and *zi* 字. *Ming* is his first given name taken after his birth, and *zi* is the second one, usually assumed at the age of 20 (In traditional

Huangdi. On the other hand, Liu Bei is called by his *zi*, Xuande 玄德. After Liu Bei is titled Hanzhong Wang, he is called Xuande or Hanzhong Wang. After he is titled Huangdi, he is respectfully called Xianzhu 先主.<sup>16</sup>

In ancient China, the *jun* 君 – *chen* 臣 relationship<sup>17</sup> was one of the most important and basic social relations. Kongzi 孔子 (approximately 551–479 B.C.E.) said: “*Chen* serves *jun* with loyalty”.<sup>18</sup> Traditional opinion held that this principle should be strictly followed unless “[*jun*] is as brutal as Jie 桀 and Zhou 紂;<sup>19</sup> [*chen* is] as benevolent as Tang 湯 and Wu 武”).<sup>20</sup> Xiaoxian Huangdi was not like Jie and

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China, a baby was one year old upon birth. Therefore, the traditional Chinese year of 20 is actually equal to 19). An educated man should call himself by his *ming* to show humility, while calling another man by his *zi* demonstrates respect.

<sup>16</sup> This form of address is from *SGZ*, in which Liu Bei is called Xianzhu (the first Zhu), and his son Liu Chan 劉禪 (r. 223–263 C.E.) is called Houzhu 後主 (the last Zhu). *Yanyi* continues to use these customary forms of address. However, because *Yanyi* denies the legitimacy of Wei, the Wei monarchs are called Zhu in the book, too.

<sup>17</sup> *Jun* refers to the one who owns a large amount of land, and has the highest social rank in his given area. For example, a Tianzi is the *jun* of Tianxia and a *zhuhou* is the *jun* of a state. *Chen* is the one who serves the *jun*. Broadly, everyone who lives on the *jun*'s land is his *chen*. The *Shijing* 詩經 says: “All [lands] under the sky are the Wang's lands. [All people] from the lands and shores are Wang's *chen*” (溥天之下，莫非王土，率土之濱，莫非王臣). See *Shijing jinzhu jinyi*, 6.339. However, in the *jun–chen* relationship, *chen* usually refers to noblemen, government and military officers who receive benefits like lands, salaries, and privileges from the *jun*. The *jun–chen* relationship can be extended to master and servant, superior and subordinate.

<sup>18</sup> 臣事君以忠. *Lunyu jinzhu jinyi*, 3.41.

<sup>19</sup> Jie and Zhou were the last Tianzi of the Xia and Shang dynasties respectively. They are well-known examples of tyrants.

<sup>20</sup> [君]有桀、紂之暴，[臣]有湯、武之仁. *Zizhi tongjian*, 1.3. Tang and Wu (a shorter form of Zhou Wu Wang 周武王) were the founding Tianzi of the Shang and Zhou dynasties respectively. They are examples of *shengwang* 聖王 (a Wang who is extremely wise, virtuous, and competent in the execution of his duties.)

Zhou. Cao Cao and Cao Pi were not like Tang and Wu. Therefore, there was no legitimate reason for Cao-Wei 曹魏 to replace Liu-Han. Liu Bei was a *hanshi zongqin* 漢室宗親 (a member of the Han loyal house).<sup>21</sup> Only the male members of the Han loyal house had the legitimate right to succeed Tianxia, but no one else. Therefore, Liu Bei represented the righteous side, while Cao Cao was on the evil side.

However, this explanation has two problems. First of all, *Yanyi* does not disparage the house of Sun 孫.<sup>22</sup> Sun Quan 孫權,<sup>23</sup> his eldest brother Sun Ce 孫策,<sup>24</sup> and their father Sun Jian 孫堅<sup>25</sup> were not blamed for their disloyalty to the Han. Sun Jian secretly held the *yuxi* 玉璽 (a special jade seal exclusively used by the Tianzi)<sup>26</sup> but the novel does not criticize, or at least does not strongly criticize this obvious treason.

In addition, Sun Ce and Sun Quan demonstrate no intention to serve Han Tianzi.

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<sup>21</sup> Liu Bei was the descendant of Xiaojing 孝景 Huangdi Liu Qi 劉啟 (r. 15–141 B.C.E.), the fourth Huangdi of Han.

<sup>22</sup> Sun is the family name of the royal house of Wu.

<sup>23</sup> Sun Quan (282–252 C.E.) was the first Huangdi of Wu.

<sup>24</sup> Sun Ce (175–200 C.E.) was Han *taoni jiangjun* 討逆將軍, Kuaiji *taishou* 會稽太守. *Jiangjun* 將軍 was a high ranking military commander position. *Taoni* 討逆 is a title added before a *jiangjun* to differentiate him from other *jiangjun*. The territory of Eastern Han consisted of thirteen *zhou* 州: Sili 司隸, Yanzhou 兗州, Qingzhou 青州, Yuzhou 豫州, Xuzhou 徐州, Jizhou 冀州, Youzhou 幽州, Bingzhou 並州, Yangzhou 揚州, Jingzhou 荊州, Yizhou 益州, Liangzhou 涼州, and Jiaozhou 交州. Each *zhou* was further divided into a number of *jun* 郡, or other administrative units equivalent to *jun*. Kuaiji was a *jun* of Yangzhou. *Taishou* was the chief executive and military officer in charge of a *jun*.

<sup>25</sup> Sun Jian (155–191 C.E.) was Han *polu jiangjun* 破虜將軍 and Yuzhou *cishi* 豫州刺史. *Cishi* 刺史 was a position initially established to monitor high ranking officials in a *zhou*, and possibly accuse those who were guilty of breaking the law. However, in the late Han and Sanguo periods, it was more like a position for a high ranking military commander.

<sup>26</sup> *SGYY*, 6.53-54.



Exactly like Cao Cao, they simply want to consolidate and expand their own territory. However, unlike Cao Cao, they are regarded as heroes in *Yanyi*. After Sun Ce's death, a poem is written to praise him:

[He] fought alone at the South-East; [he] was called *xiao bawang* 小霸王.<sup>27</sup>

[He] made plans [as firmly] as a crouching tiger, [he] made decisions [as vigorous and swift] as a rising eagle.

[His] mighty power pacified Sanjiang 三江;<sup>28</sup> [his] renown had spread throughout Sihai 四海.<sup>29</sup>

[...]<sup>30</sup>

After Sun Quan died, a poem of praise was written for him too:

[He with] purple whiskers and bluish green eyes, is known as a hero; [he] was able to make his subordinates loyal to him.

[He] took 24 years to accomplish the great cause<sup>31</sup> and occupied Jiangdong 江東<sup>32</sup> like a crouching tiger and a winding *long* 龍.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Bawang* (hegemonial Wang) is the title of Xiang Yu 項羽 (full title Xi Chu *bawang* 西楚霸王), who was exceptionally famous for his valiancy, strength, and fighting skills. *Xiao bawang* means “younger Xiang Xu.”

<sup>28</sup> Sanjiang refers to the areas around three rivers: Wujiang 吳江, Qiantangjiang 錢塘江, and Puyangjiang 浦陽江.

<sup>29</sup> Sihai literally means the four seas. Ancient Chinese believed that the mainland is surrounded by four seas. Therefore, sihai is used as another name for Tianxia.

<sup>30</sup> 獨戰東南地，人稱小霸王。運籌如虎踞，決策似鷹揚。威鎮三江靖，名聞四海香。...., *SGYY*, 29.258.

<sup>31</sup> The great cause refers to his achievement of being Huangdi.

<sup>32</sup> Jiangdong refers to the downstream area of Changjiang 長江.

<sup>33</sup> *Long* is a legendary supernatural creature with a body like a snake, horns like a deer, scales like a fish, feelers, and claws. In ancient Chinese legends, it is able to fly, dive, summon cloud and call for rain. *Long* and tiger

Secondly, *Yanyi* does not praise all *hanshi zongqin*. For example, its evaluations on Liu Biao 劉表 and Liu Zhang 劉璋 are not high at all.<sup>34</sup> It is obvious that Liu Bei's remote kinship to the House of Han is not the major reason for him to be praised.

Another popular opinion holds that legitimacy means the combination of *de* 德 (“virtue”) and lineage, and the former may be more important than the latter.<sup>35</sup>

However, scholars have different understandings of *de*. Moss Roberts thought that *de* is one's “natural charisma or magnetism,” and to have *de* is “to gain men's confidence, to win their allegiance.”<sup>36</sup> He argued that *de* is the quality that characterizes Liu Bei, but that Cao Cao lacks in the novel.<sup>37</sup> Roberts's opinion is not persuasive. Cao Cao also demonstrates unbelievable charisma. Many heroes are loyal to him, even to the point of being willing to die for him. I will discuss this in detail later in this article. The conclusion of Roberts that *de* constitutes “a higher form of lineage” is also questionable. In ancient China, although *de* was regarded as the most important quality of an ideal Tianzi, from the point of view of practically, it was hardly of prime consideration in the succession system. *Gongyangzhuan* 公羊傳 says:

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symbolize might and power in China. 紫髯碧眼號英雄，能使臣僚肯盡忠。二十四年興大業，龍盤虎踞在江東。 SGYY, 108.939.

<sup>34</sup> Liu Biao was Han *zhennan jiangjun* 鎮南將軍 and Jingzhou *mu* 荊州牧. *Mu* 牧 was the chief executive and military officer in charge of a *zhou*. Liu Zhang was Han *zhenwei jiangjun* 振威將軍 and Yizhou *mu* 益州牧. They were descendants of Xiaojing Huangdi too.

<sup>35</sup> Moss Roberts argued that *de* “can itself be seen as a higher form of lineage” (Roberts 1994, vol. 3, p. 1468-1469). Xu Zhongwei also argued that the author of *Yanyi* seems to pay more attention to *de* rather than lineage (Xu Zhongwei 2002, p. 74).

<sup>36</sup> Roberts 1994, p. 1471.

<sup>37</sup> Roberts 1994, p. 1468.

The selection of an heir from the *dizi* 嫡子<sup>38</sup> is based on [who is] elder rather than [who is] more virtuous; [if there is no *dizi*], the selection of an heir from the *shuzi* 庶子 is based on [whose mother's position] is higher<sup>39</sup> rather than [who is] elder.<sup>40</sup>

The reason is very simple. Since it is impossible to design a perfect system, a wise choice is to find a better heir. *Di* 嫡 and *zhang* 長 are objective criteria, while *de* is a subjective criterion. Determination of the heir based on *di* and *zhang* may not have resulted in the finding of the best candidate, but could at least guarantee the smooth transfer of power. Determination of the heir based on *de* might have caused unnecessary struggles, and the final winner might not have been the best choice.

Xu Zhongwei thought that *de* is “the virtue of benevolence” (*rende* 仁德).<sup>41</sup> Some other scholars also thought that benevolence is the main reason for the revering Liu stance of *Yanyi*.<sup>42</sup> Compared to Cao Cao, for whom many records of massacres exist (as is true of a number of his associates), history shows us that Liu Bei was undoubtedly a benevolent ruler. However, overall, Liu Zhang might have been more benevolent. During the war with Liu Bei, Liu Zhang's subordinate Zheng Du 鄭度

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<sup>38</sup> In ancient China, a man could have more than one wife. However, regardless of how many wives a man may have, only one was married to the man through a formal ceremony, and only that one was regarded as an equal spouse to the man. That wife was known as *qi* 妻, while the others were in a subordinate position, known as *qie* 妾. The sons of *qi* were called *dizi*, and the sons of *qie* were called *shuzi*. The position of *dizi* was higher than *shuzi*.

<sup>39</sup> The positions of *qie* were also divided into high and low.

<sup>40</sup> 立嫡以長不賢，立子以貴不以長. *Chunqiu Gongyangzhuan zhushu*, 1.15-16.

<sup>41</sup> Xu Zhongwei 2002, p. 71–74.

<sup>42</sup> See Zhou Jialu 1991, p. 48; Shen Bojun 2011, p. 83.

suggested that he move the residents of Baxi 巴西 and Zitong 梓潼,<sup>43</sup> and destroy all reserves to starve Liu Bei's army.<sup>44</sup> However, Liu Zhang rejected this plan by saying that "I have heard of defending the enemy to make people stable, [but] never heard of moving people to hide from the enemy."<sup>45</sup> After Chengdu had been besieged by Liu Bei, although the city still had 30,000 elite soldiers, reserves enough for one year, and the officials and people were willing to fight to the death, in hopes of avoiding further casualties, Liu Zhang decided to surrender.<sup>46</sup> However, *Yanyi* does not praise him. On the contrary, in the novel, Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮<sup>47</sup> says that he is too weak, and advises Liu Bei not to be the same as him.<sup>48</sup> Kongzi said the correct way of governance is "using lenient laws to offset the inadequacy of tough laws;

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<sup>43</sup> Baxi and Zitong were two *jun* of Yizhou. They were on the North-East of Chengdu 成都, the capital of Yizhou and on Liu Bei's marching route to it.

<sup>44</sup> *SGZ*, 37.958.

<sup>45</sup> 吾聞拒敵以安民，未聞動民以避敵也。 *SGZ*, 37.958.

<sup>46</sup> *SGZ*, 31.869.

<sup>47</sup> Zhuge Liang was Shu-Han *chenxiang* 丞相 and Wu *xianghou* 武鄉侯. *Chenxiang* was the highest position of *chen*, he was responsible for assisting or representing *jun* to handle all national affairs. In Eastern Han, the ranks of nobility from high to low were Huangdi, Gong 公 (a title in principle only conferred to the successors of the houses of Shang and Zhou), Wang, *liehou* 列侯, and *guanneihou* 關內侯. *Liehou* again included three ranks: *xianhou* 縣侯, *xianghou* 鄉侯, and *tinghou* 亭侯. A *xianhou* was granted a *xian* 縣 (an administrative unit below *jun*) as his *shiyi* 食邑 (an administrative unit where the taxes were paid to the nobleman rather than the central government). A *xianghou* was granted a *xiang* 鄉 (an administrative unit below a *jun* or *xian*) as his *shiyi*. A *tinghou* was granted a *ting* 亭 (an administrative unit below *xiang*) as his *shiyi*. The forms of address for *xianhou*, *xianghou*, and *tinghou* are the name of the *xian* plus *hou*, the name of the *xiang* plus *xianghou*, and the name of the *ting* plus *tinghou* respectively.

<sup>48</sup> *SGYY*, 65.566.

using tough laws to offset the inadequacy of lenient laws.”<sup>49</sup> Excessive benevolence is a weakness rather than a virtue. I think that benevolence is as well not the major reason for *Yanyi* to praise Liu Bei. Xu Zhongwei’s understanding on *de* is too narrow. *Zuozhuan* 左傳 says that “frugality is a common [feature] of *de*”.<sup>50</sup> It also says:

*Zhong* 忠 (loyalty) represents the purity of *de*; *xin* 信 (the quality of being honest and matching one’s words to actions) represents the consolidation of *de*; *beirang* 卑讓 (the quality of being humble and modestly giving up [what one should have]) is the base of *de*.<sup>51</sup>

*Zhou li* 周禮 mentions *liu de* 六德 (six virtues): *zhi* 知 (the quality of being sensible), *ren* 仁 (the quality of loving people and extending the love to other things), *sheng* 聖 (the quality of being wise and knowledgeable), *yi* 義 (the quality of making judgments righteously and appropriately), *zhong* 忠 (the quality of being sincere”), and *he* 和 (“the quality of being moderate”).<sup>52</sup> It can be seen that *de* is a very rich concept rather than just benevolence.

Shen Bojun proposed another reason for Liu Bei to be praised, which is that he “respects virtuous and talented persons, and has the wisdom to appreciate people’s [characters and capabilities]”.<sup>53</sup> This reason is still not convincing because Cao Cao and Sun Quan share the same merit, too. I agree with Roberts and Xu Zhongwei that

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<sup>49</sup> 寬以濟猛，猛以濟寬。 *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義 (hereafter *CQZZZY*), 49.1621.

<sup>50</sup> 儉，德之共也。 *CQZZZY*, 10.318.

<sup>51</sup> 忠，德之正也；信，德之固也；卑讓，德之基也。 *CQZZZY*, 18.561.

<sup>52</sup> *Zhou li zhengyi* (hereafter *ZLZY*), 19.756.

<sup>53</sup> 尊賢禮士，有知人之明。 Shen Bojun 2011, p. 83.

*de* is the main reason for Liu Bei to be praised, but I also think the most valued part of *de* in *Yanyi* is *zhongyi* 忠義 (loyalty and righteousness).

Cao Cao was the descendant of Cao Can 曹參, one of the founding *gongchen* 功臣<sup>54</sup> of Han. Cao Cao's grandfather Cao Teng 曹騰, and father Cao Song 曹嵩 had been granted the title of nobility and high positions by Han.<sup>55</sup> Cao Cao himself was recommended to be an officer because of his family background.<sup>56</sup> The house of Cao had a very close relationship with Han, and had received great favors from Han. Therefore, Cao Cao should have served Han with loyalty in return, but he did not. This is why he was belittled in *Yanyi*. On the other side, Sun Jian was the descendant of Sun Wu 孫武.<sup>57</sup> His family had no close connections with Han. Therefore, *Yanyi* has no strong opinion about Sun Jian and his sons' disloyalty to Han.

As for Liu Biao and Liu Zhang, both were powerful *hanshi zongqin*. When Tianxia,

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<sup>54</sup> *Gongchen* refers to a *chen* who has made great contributions to his *jun*.

<sup>55</sup> Cao Teng was Han *zhongchangshi* 中常侍, *dachangqiu* 大常秋 and was granted the title of nobility: Feicheng *tinghou* 費城亭侯. *Zhongchangshi* was a high ranking "eunuch officer" (*huangguan* 宦官), a position of attending upon the Tianzi as a counselor. As an eunuch officer, *zhongchangshi* could enter the "inner palace" (*neigong* 內宮) and assist in inner palace affairs. *Dachangqiu* was the chief eunuch officer serving the *huanghou* 皇后 (the *qi* of Huangdi). Cao Song, the adopted son of Cao Teng was Han *taiwei* 太尉 and the one who inherited the title of Feicheng *tinghou* from Cao Teng. *Taiwei* was ranked first among the *san gong* 三公 (the three highest standing positions of the Eastern Han government: *taiwei*, *situ* 司徒, and *sikong* 司空). *Taiwei* was in charge of accessing officers' military achievements; *situ* was in charge of humanization affairs; and *sikong* was in charge of water and construction affairs. The three officials also worked together to handle state sacrificial ceremonies, state funerals, discuss national affairs, and provide advice to the Tianzi.

<sup>56</sup> SGZ, 1.2.

<sup>57</sup> Sun Wu was a *jiangjun* of the state of Wu in Chunqiu 春秋. He is the author of *Sunzi bingfa* 孫子兵法, the greatest military work in ancient China.

the property left by their forefathers, was in great disorder, they did not, however, try or at least try hard enough to revive it. On the other hand, Liu Bei lost his father when he was a boy. As a result, his family was not rich. He and his mother made a living by selling shoes and mats they weaved by themselves. His success was mainly based on his personal efforts rather than his identity as *hanshi zongqin*. Andrew H. Plaks thought that Liu Bei's image in *Yanyi* was like that of a hypocrite because of his dishonorable activities like "borrowing" Jingzhou from Sun Quan, and taking Yizhou from Liu Zhang.<sup>58</sup> I think one of the most important factors that make *Yanyi* a great work is that it reflects the complexity of humanity rather than shaping perfectly moral paragons. The characters usually are not just simply drawn in black and white, but reveal both bright and dark sides. In the novel, Liu Bei is benevolent, but also ambitious and manipulative. It is unimaginable that a simple and naive man could stand up to Cao Cao as an equal. His complex personality makes his image vivid and real. However, we should differentiate between *dayi* 大義 (great righteousness) and *xiaojie* 小節 (small righteousness). After Cao Cao controls the central government and makes the Tianzi his puppet, Liu Biao and Liu Zhang do nothing. Liu Bei participates in a conspiracy against Cao Cao. Although his power is weak in the beginning, and he fails many times, as Chen Shou comments, he "never gave up after facing setbacks" (*zhe'er bu nao* 折而不撓).<sup>59</sup> Eventually, Liu Bei successfully retains one of the three portions of Tianxia for his House. Had Liu Zhang continued to

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<sup>58</sup> Plaks 1987, pp. 427-429. Lu Xun 魯迅 also had the same opinion (*id.*, 1998, p. 87).

<sup>59</sup> *SGZ*, 32.892

rule Yizhou, he probably would have surrendered to Cao Cao. Liu Bei's imperfection in *xiaojie* does not obscure his insistence on *dayi*. This is why he is praised.

It also should be noticed that although Liu Bei's image is not perfect, he never breaches the moral bottom line. After Liu Biao's death, his younger son 劉琮 Liu Cong ascends to his position, and surrenders to Cao Cao. Yi Ji 伊籍<sup>60</sup> suggests that Liu Bei raids Xiangyang 襄陽 (the capital of Jingzhou) and captures Liu Cong, but Liu Bei refuses to do so.<sup>61</sup> Yu Jiyuan says that the *Yanyi* is vague about the reasons for that Liu Bei refuses to take Jingzhou from Liu Biao, but accepts Yizhou's taking from Liu Zhang.<sup>62</sup> I think that the reason is, however, very clear. Liu Bei's relationship with Liu Biao and with Liu Zhang are totally different. After Liu Bei is defeated by Cao Cao again, and loses his base Nunan 汝南, Liu Biao takes him in.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, Liu Bei cannot bring himself to oppose Liu Biao or even his son because Liu Biao has done a great favor to him. The relationship between Liu Bei and Liu Zhang is a totally different case. Liu Bei does not owe anything to Liu Zhang. Liu Zhang requests Liu Bei to help him defend Zhang Lu 張魯, but then does not provide the amount of reinforcements and grain asked by Liu Bei.<sup>64</sup> Although Liu Bei's

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<sup>60</sup> In *Yanyi*, Yi Ji was Liu Biao's *mubin* 幕賓 (guest counselor) and saved Liu Bei's life. At that time, he was serving Biao's eldest son Liu Qi 劉琦.

<sup>61</sup> *SGYY*, 40.351.

<sup>62</sup> Yu Jiyuan 2007, p. 31.

<sup>63</sup> *SGYY*, 31.278-279.

<sup>64</sup> Liu Bei is informed that Cao Cao has attacked Sun Quan again. Therefore, he notifies Liu Zhang that he needs to return to Jingzhou to help Sun Quan, and asks for reinforcements and grain. Liu Zhang only provides fractions of the quantity that Liu Bei requests. Then Liu Bei finally decides to attack Liu Zhang. See *SGYY*, 62.532-33.



response is excessive, Liu Zhang does offer him an excuse to start the war.

In short, I believe the political standpoint of *Yanyi* is mainly based on *zhongyi* rather than other factors like lineage and benevolence. However, *Yanyi* regards the *jun–chen* relationship as bidirectional and mutual, quite similar to the view of Mengzi 孟子 who says:

If *jun* regards *chen* as his hands and feet, then *chen* will regard *jun* as his heart. If *jun* regards *chen* as dogs and horses, then *chen* will regard *jun* as a stranger. If *jun* regards *chen* as muds and grasses, then *chen* will regard *jun* as an enemy.<sup>65</sup>

*Chen*'s loyalty to *jun* is conditional. The prerequisite is that *jun* and/or *jun*'s ancestors respected and treated *chen* and/or his ancestors kindly. Otherwise, it is unnecessary for *chen* to remain loyal. For example, in a war between Sun Quan and Huang Zu 黃祖,<sup>66</sup> Huang Zu's inferior commander Gan Ning 甘寧 has made important contributions in the effort to beat back Sun Quan's army, but he is treated coldly after the war. Therefore, he leaves Huang Zu and turns to Sun Quan.<sup>67</sup> This action is not regarded as unrighteous in *Yanyi*.

## CHARACTER EVALUATION

Jian Bozan strongly criticized *Yanyi*'s historical view. He argued that it is biased and “Huangdi-centered” (*yi Huangdi wei zhongxin de* 以皇帝為中心的), and said that

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<sup>65</sup> 君之視臣如手足，則臣視君如腹心；君之視臣如犬馬，則臣視君如國人；君之視臣如土芥，則臣視君如寇仇。 *Mengzi jinzhu jinyi*, 4.209.

<sup>66</sup> Huang Zu was Jiangxia 江夏 (a *jun* of Jingzhou) *taishou*, Liu Biao's subordinate.

<sup>67</sup> *SGYY*, 31.278-279.

*Yanyi* belittles everyone who was disloyal to the Huangdi.<sup>68</sup> I think that having a clear political standpoint does not necessarily mean compromising objectivity. There are two different types of standards: single standard and double standard. The former judges a person according to his or her actions. The latter judges a person based on who that person is and/or which camp that person belongs to. The former is more objective than the latter. A question is which type of standard is used in *Yanyi*.

In *Yanyi*, Guan Yu 關羽, Liu Bei's second younger sworn brother is a representative of *zhongyi*. Liu Bei treats Guan Yu like his own younger brother, and Guan Yu serves Liu Bei as his own elder brother. In chapter 25, after Liu Bei has been defeated by Cao Cao and ran away without a trace, Guan Yu's army is isolated, helpless and surrounded by superior Cao forces. Finally Guan Yu is persuaded to give up the fight, but he comes to terms with Cao Cao on three conditions. The last but most important one is that Guan Yu agrees to temporarily serve Cao Cao, but he must be free to go as soon as he knows where Liu Bei is. Cao Cao appreciates Guan Yu (and this arrangement) very much, and tries to make Guan Yu loyal to him. He offers Guan Yu a higher position (*pian jiangjun* 偏將軍), title of nobility (Hanshou *tinghou* 漢壽亭侯), Chitu 赤兔,<sup>69</sup> wealth, and the companionship of beautiful women. However, after knowing Liu Bei's location, Guan Yu still leaves Cao Cao without hesitation and returns to Liu Bei. *Yanyi* highly praises Guan Yu for his loyalty to Liu Bei, and regards him as a great hero. Guan Yu is respectfully called Gong 公<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Jian Bozan 1959, cited in Zhou Zhaoxin 1990, p. 95.

<sup>69</sup> Chitu is the name of the best war horse in *Yanyi*.

<sup>70</sup> Gong was a respectful form of address for male adults at that time.

throughout the novel. It should be noticed that he is the only one who receives such a treatment.

Let us look at another character, Pang De 龐德.<sup>71</sup> In chapter 74, Guan Yu besieges Fancheng 樊城 (Cao Cao's important city in Jingzhou). Cao Cao orders Yu Jin 于禁<sup>72</sup> and Pang De, leading seven *jun* 軍,<sup>73</sup> to rescue the place, but they are flooded and captured by Guan Yu. Pang De flatly rejects the invitation to surrender, and Guan Yu then beheads him. Although Pang De is an enemy of Guan Yu, his image in *Yanyi* is heroic and positive. His one-on-one fight with Guan Yu in chapter 74 is one of the fiercest struggles in the novel. The logic behind the characterization is very simple. If Guan Yu's loyalty to Liu Bei is laudable, then Pang De's loyalty to Cao Cao is laudable too. The negative judgments against Cao Cao do not affect the judgments against his subordinates. Actually, many of Cao Cao's subordinates are presented in positive and heroic images, such as Guo Jia 郭嘉, Zhang Liao 張遼, Xu Chu 許褚, etc.<sup>74</sup> They are major characters in some chapters, which chapter titles show. For example, "Guo Jia leaves behind a plan at his death to stabilize Liaodong 遼東,"<sup>75</sup> (chapter 33); "Zhang Liao fills [Sun Quan's] soldiers with awe at Xiaoyaojin 逍遙

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<sup>71</sup> Pang De was Wei *liyi jiangjun* 立義將軍 and Guanmen *tinghou* 關門亭侯.

<sup>72</sup> Yu Jin was Wei *zuo jiangjun* 左將軍 and Yishou *tinghou* 益壽亭侯.

<sup>73</sup> *Jun* was the largest military unit at that time. Usually, a *jun* was led by a *jiangjun*. Its number of soldiers was not fixed.

<sup>74</sup> Guo Jia was Han *sikong junshi jijiu* 司空軍師祭酒, meaning *junshi jijiu* of the *sikong*. *Junshi jijiu* was an officer working as a counselor and secretary. Zhang Liao was Wei *qian jiangjun* 前將軍 and Jinyang *hou* 晉陽侯. Xu Chu was Wei *wuwei jiangjun* 武衛將軍 and Mu *xianghou* 牟鄉侯.

<sup>75</sup> 郭嘉遺計定遼東. *SGYY*, 33.289. Liaodong was a *jun* of Youzhou.

津”<sup>76</sup> (chapter 67); and “Xu Chu fights with Ma Chao 馬超<sup>77</sup> by stripping himself naked to the waist”<sup>78</sup> (chapter 59).

The same standard has been applied to the characters of Wu, too. Two of the greatest heroes of Wu, Taishi Ci 太史慈 and Gan Ning are highly praised after their deaths. The poem of praise written for Taishi Ci is as follows:

[A man] took an oath to be *zhong* and *xiao* 孝<sup>79</sup>; [he is] Taishi Ci of Donglai 東萊.<sup>80</sup>

[His] name was well-known in remote frontier forts; [his] archery and fighting skills on horseback filled powerful [enemy] troops with awe.

[People still have a vivid memory] on the day when he repaid the favor [of Kong Rong 孔融] at Beihai 北海;<sup>81</sup> [People still have a vivid memory] of the time when he fought fiercely at Shenting 神亭.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> 張遼威震逍遙津. *SGYY*, 67.578. In chapter 67, Zhang Liao defeats Sun Quan at Xiaoyaojin, a key ferry crossing close to Hefei 合肥, the capital of Yangzhou.

<sup>77</sup> Ma Chao was a powerful warlord at Liangzhou. In *Yanyi*, he rises against Cao Cao who has killed his father Ma Teng 馬騰. In chapter 59, during the war between him and Cao Cao, he has a very fierce one-on-one fight with Xu Chu.

<sup>78</sup> 許褚裸衣鬥馬超. *SGYY*, 59.503.

<sup>79</sup> To serve one’s parents faithfully is called *xiao*.

<sup>80</sup> Donglai was a *jun* of Qingzhou.

<sup>81</sup> Beihai is a *guo* 國 of Qingzhou. In the Eastern Han, *guo* was an administrative unit equivalent to *jun*. Kong Rong was Beihai *xiang* 相 (*xiang* was a position equivalent to *taishou*). Kong Rong has done favors for Taishi Ci’s mother. Therefore, after knowing that Kong Rong is besieged by rebels, Taishi Ci goes alone to help him in return. See *SGYY*, 11.91-93.

<sup>82</sup> Taishi Ci and Sun Ce used to be enemies. They have a fierce single combat at Shenting, a mountain at Wujun 吳郡 of Yangzhou. Afterwards, Taishi Ci is captured by Sun Ce, but Sun releases him and treats him kindly and respectfully. Hence Taishi Ci starts to loyally serve the house of Sun. See *SGYY*, 15.132-136.

[He] spoke [his uncompleted] great aspiration when approaching his end;<sup>83</sup> [people] sighed [for his death before realizing his aspiration] forever!<sup>84</sup>

The poem of praise written for Gan Ning is as follows:

Gan Xingba 甘興霸<sup>85</sup> was from Wujun; [his] warships with brocade tents [advanced freely with no resistance] in Changjiang.

[He] repaid [his] *jun*<sup>86</sup> because he was respected and understood; [he] repaid his personal enemy with true friendship to dissolve hatred.<sup>87</sup>

[He] raided [Wei's] camp by leading light cavalries; [before] leading his soldiers [to launch the surprise attack], [he] drank large cups [of rice wine with them].<sup>88</sup>

[After his death], divine crows presented;<sup>89</sup> *xianghuo* 香火<sup>90</sup> is never lacked in [his

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<sup>83</sup> Taishi Ci says: “[If] a true man is born in troubled times, [he should] carry a three *chi* 尺 (a traditionally Chinese length unit equivalent to 23.1 cm in Han) long sword and establish outstanding achievements. Now [my] aspiration has not been realized. Why am I going to die!” 大丈夫生於亂世，當帶三尺劍立不世之功；今所志未遂，奈何死乎！ *SGYY*, 53.459.

<sup>84</sup> 矢志全忠孝，東萊太史慈：姓名昭遠塞，弓馬震雄師；北海酬恩日，神亭酣戰時。臨終言壯志，千古共嗟謬！ *SGYY*, 53.460.

<sup>85</sup> Gan Ning's *zi* is Xingba.

<sup>86</sup> His *jun* refers to Sun Quan.

<sup>87</sup> In *Yanyi*, Gan Ning and Ling Tong 凌統, once were personal enemies because Gan Ning killed Ling Tong's father Ling Cao 凌操. Even after they become colleagues, Ling Tong still hates Gan Ning and wants to kill him. Later on, Gan Ning saves Ling Tong's life in a battle and then they become friends. See *SGYY*, 68.588-589.

<sup>88</sup> During a war between Cao Cao and Sun Quan, Gan Ning leads just a hundred light cavalry to raid Cao's camp one night. This raid is very successful, without even one man lost. See *SGYY*, 68.587-588.

<sup>89</sup> During a war between Shu-Han and Wu, Gan Ning dies when he sustains an arrow injury. After his death, hundreds of crows revolve around his body. See *SGYY*, 83.708.

<sup>90</sup> *Xianghuo* means the joss sticks and candles burning at a temple to worship gods, ancestors, and great people, etc.

temple].<sup>91</sup>

The same standard still applies even for minor characters who are not from the three major camps. In chapter 30, during the battle of Guandu 官渡, Yuan Shao's 袁紹<sup>92</sup> subordinate, Ju Shou 沮授<sup>93</sup> is captured by Cao Cao. He refuses to surrender, and is executed. A poem is written to praise his loyalty to Yuan Shao:

Hebei 河北<sup>94</sup> had so many public figures; Ju Jun<sup>95</sup> was one of the most loyal and virtuous one [among them].

[He] could tell the type of combat formation by gazing it; [he] could explain meteorological and astronomical phenomena by looking up [at the sky].

[His] heart was as firm as the iron until his death; [his] bearing at the time of facing death was [as imposing] as cloud clusters.

Cao Gong 曹公<sup>96</sup> admired [his] righteous, forthright, and upright [qualities]; [therefore] especially built a solitary grave for him.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> 吳郡甘興霸，長江錦幔舟。酬君重知己，報友化仇讎。劫寨將輕騎，驅兵飲巨甌。神鴉能顯聖，香火永千秋。SGYY, 83.708.

<sup>92</sup> Yuan Shao was Han *da jiangjun* 大將軍 (ranked first among all *jiangjun*). He once was the most powerful warlord. He and Cao Cao had a decisive battle at Guandu in the fifth year of Han Jian'an 建安 (200 C.E.). He suffered a disastrous defeat in the battle and then his power declined.

<sup>93</sup> In *Yanyi*, Ju Shou is the best counselor of Yuan Shao.

<sup>94</sup> Hebei refers to the area at the north of Huanghe 黃河, which was controlled by Yuan Shao.

<sup>95</sup> Here, Jun is used as a respectful form of address for an adult man.

<sup>96</sup> Cao Gong refers to Cao Cao.

<sup>97</sup> 河北多名士，忠貞推沮君：凝眸知陣法，仰面識天文；至死心如鐵，臨危氣似雲：曹公欽義烈，特與建孤墳。SGYY, 30.271.

In chapter 60, Liu Zhang is facing the threat of Zhang Lu's 張魯 attack.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, he invites Liu Bei to aid him in his defense against Zhang Lu. However, his subordinate Wang Lei 王累 thinks that Liu Bei will be a much greater threat than Zhang Lu if he is allowed to enter Yizhou. His efforts to persuade Liu Zhang end in failure. Finally, in order to stop Liu Zhang, Wang Lei commits suicide. His loyalty to Liu Zhang is highly praised by a poem:

[He] hanged himself upside down from the walled city gate with a *jianzhang* 諫章<sup>99</sup> on his hands; [he] gave up his life to repay Liu Zhang.

[Although] Huang Quan 黃權<sup>100</sup> broke off his teeth, [he] finally surrendered to [Liu] Bei; how could [his] moral integrity be as upright as Wang Lei's!<sup>101</sup>

Wujun *taishou* Xu Gong 許貢, a negligible figure in the novel, is killed by Sun Ce in chapter 29. Xu Gong's three *ke* 客<sup>102</sup> attempt to assassinate Sun Ce in revenge. Sun Ce suffers serious injuries, and the three *ke* are killed by his subordinates. Although the names of Xu Gong's three *ke* are not even recorded, they are treated no differently than other great heroes like Sun Ce in *Yanyi*. A special poem praises their loyalty to Xu Gong:

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<sup>98</sup> Zhang Lu was Han Hanning 漢寧 *taishou*. Hanning was a *jun* of Yizhou. Although Liu Zhang was Yizhou *mu*, he did not control the whole of Yizhou.

<sup>99</sup> *Jianzhang* was a type of official document written by a *chen* to persuade a *jun*.

<sup>100</sup> Huang Quan is Liu Zhang's other subordinate, and is also strongly against inviting Liu Bei. He tried to dissuade Liu Zhang by clinging to the latter's clothes with his teeth. Liu Zhang is very angry, and pulls his clothes out, which breaks off two of Huang Quan's front teeth. See *SGYY*, 60.521.

<sup>101</sup> 倒掛城門捧諫章，拚將一死報劉璋。黃權折齒終降備，矢節何如王累剛。 *SGYY*, 60.522.

<sup>102</sup> A *ke* was a man who was provided room and board by a master. He worked for his master but was more like a guest rather than a servant. A *ke* usually was free to choose and leave his master.

[...] The three *ke* of Xu could die for righteousness; [they] made [people like] Yu Rang 豫讓<sup>103</sup> who sacrificed himself not that rare.<sup>104</sup>

Although *Yanyi* pays little attention to female characters, the same standard of evaluation applies to them as well. In chapter 107, Wei *taifu* 太傅<sup>105</sup> Sima Yi 司馬懿 starts a coup against *da jiangjun* Cao Shuang 曹爽. Cao Shuang's subordinate Xin Chang 辛敞 talks about it to his elder sister Xin Xianying 辛憲英. She predicts that Cao Shuang will lose. Xin Chang then asks if he should go to follow Cao Shuang under that circumstance. Xin Xianying replies:

Fulfilling one's duty is a great righteousness. Even if a stranger is in trouble, [you] may still sympathize [with] that person. [To abandon your superior now] is just like letting it go when you are driving a carriage with your horsewhip. Nothing is worse than this.<sup>106</sup>

Xin Chang listens to his elder sister, notifies Cao Shuang about the situation, and stays at his side. Eventually, the coup ends with Sima Yi's victory. Cao Shuang is beheaded. However, Xin Chang is exempted because Sima Yi thinks he simply does what he should do. A poem praises the actions of Xin Xianying:

[...] Xianying with the family name Xin had advised her younger brother [to be loyal]; therefore, it makes [people] praise her noble quality forever.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Yu Rang was a famous assassin in the Chunqiu Zhanguo 春秋戰國 period. He sacrificed himself to revenge his master. See *Shiji* 史記 (hereafter *SJ*), 86.2519-2521.

<sup>104</sup> 許客三人能死義，殺身豫讓未為奇. *SGYY*, 29.254.

<sup>105</sup> *Taifu* was a position even higher than *san gong*, but usually with no actual power. A *taifu*'s duty was to guide the *tianzi*.

<sup>106</sup> 職守，人之大義也。凡人在難，猶或恤之；執鞭而棄其事，不祥莫大焉. *SGYY*, 107.929.

<sup>107</sup> 辛氏憲英曾勸弟，故令千載頌高風. *SGYY*, 107.932.



In conclusion, it is obvious that a single standard, *zhongyi*, has been used in *Yanyi*. The loyalty appreciated in the novel is not just for Huangdi, as argued by Jian Bozan. The opinion of *Yanyi* towards the *zhongyi* is that “[Each] serves his master respectively; [each] is loyal to his master respectively” (*ge wei qi zhu, ge jin qi zhong* 各為其主，各盡其忠), which is a major theme of the work. Although *Yanyi* is a work of fiction, its evaluations of historical figures seem to be rather objective and impartial.

## CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Some scholars have criticized *Yanyi* for apparent contradictions in the shaping of its characters.<sup>108</sup> I think such contradictions actually reflect *Yanyi*'s excellence in the shaping of its characters. Our world is not simply black and white but, on the contrary, rather full of contradictions. Some scholars have considered the characterization of *Yanyi* flat and stereotypical.<sup>109</sup> Their criticism is groundless. Actually, the characters shaped in *Yanyi* are round and rich. The positive characters are not perfect. Liu Bei is a representative of *renyi* 仁義 (benevolence and righteousness), but his military ability is ordinary. Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 is a representative of wisdom, but he has

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<sup>108</sup> See Xu Zhongwei 1988, p. 55; Sheng Xingyi 200, pp. 52–55.

<sup>109</sup> Lu Xun said: “[When *Yanyi*] is describing good persons, [they] almost have no shortcomings, but [when] describing bad persons, [they] almost have no merits” (寫好的人，簡直一點壞處都沒有；而寫不好的人，又一點好處都沒有) (*id.*, 1981, vol. 9, p. 323). Zhang Yuelin said that *Yanyi* “absolutizes the characters” (把人物絕對化) (*id.*, 1994, p. 96).

made a great error in appointing Ma Su 馬謖<sup>110</sup> the chief-commander to hold Jieting 街亭.<sup>111</sup> Guan Yu is a representative of *zhongyi*, but he loses Jingzhou because of his arrogance. On the other side, the “villains” have their clear merits. Cao Cao is ambiguously regarded as a *jianxiong* 奸雄. Although *Yanyi* strongly criticizes his *jian* (selfishness and treacherousness), we cannot deny that he is a *xiong* (a man with outstanding ability and wisdom). Numerous descriptions of his remarkable leadership, wisdom, and military talent are present in the novel.<sup>112</sup> Huang Kaijun even views his image is glorified in *Yanyi*.<sup>113</sup> Although Huang’s opinion may be too extreme, it is certain that *Yanyi* does not studiously depict Cao Cao as repugnant.

Another example of possible controversy is Lü Bu 呂布. In the novel, he is called *sanxing jianu* 三姓家奴 (a slave with three family names).<sup>114</sup> However, *Yanyi* does not spare compliments on the topic of his outstanding *wuyi* 武藝 (personal fighting skills, including archery, horsemanship, use of melee weapons, etc). In chapter 5, when Lü Bu goes to battle with forces of the anti-Dong Zhuo alliance, a poem is written to show his invincibility:

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<sup>110</sup> Ma Su was Zhuge Liang’s *canjun* 參軍, a staff officer who worked as a counselor of the chief-commander.

<sup>111</sup> In chapters 91–95, Zhuge Liang launches his first *beifa* 北伐 (northward attack of another regime) against Wei. During the war, Zhuge Liang orders Ma Su to hold Jieting, a key passage. Ma Su is an excellent counselor, but not a competent chief-commander. He loses Jieting, which causes the failure of the first *beifa*. See *SGYY*, 95.817-826.

<sup>112</sup> Shen Bojun summarized these descriptions well. See Shen Bojun 2010, pp. 75–78.

<sup>113</sup> Huang Kaijun 2011, pp. 52–58.

<sup>114</sup> This peculiar title satirizes his disloyalty. His own family name is Lü and in *Yanyi*, he has two *yifu* 義父 (acknowledged father): Dong Zhuo 董卓, a powerful warlord who once controlled the Han central government, and Ding Yuan 丁原, who is loyal to Han and a foe of Dong Zhuo. Lü Bu has betrayed both.

[...] Wen *hou* 溫侯<sup>115</sup> Lü Bu has no match in the world; [this man with] remarkable ability is praised by [people throughout] *sihai* for [his] handsome [face] and [his] tall and strong [body].

[His] silver amour protecting [his] body is joined together with [iron pieces like] the scales of a *long*; [his] golden headgear to tie up hair is decorated by tail feathers of the pheasant.

[His] staggered belt set with jewelry is fastened by a buckle shaped like a beast head; [his] brocade campaign gown is embroidered with staggered flying *feng* 鳳.<sup>116</sup> [His] fine horse jumps and kicks its feet, which causes gusts of wind; [his] *huaji* 畫戟<sup>117</sup> shined brilliantly, reflecting lights like the ones reflected from the surface of a lake in the autumn. [He] comes out from [Hulao 虎牢] *guan* 關<sup>118</sup> to challenge [his enemies], but who dares to withstand him? [All] *zhuhou*<sup>119</sup> are so frightened and their gallbladders<sup>120</sup> are burst. [...] <sup>121</sup>

In Chapter 16, another poem appears in high praise of his outstanding ability at archery:

Wen *hou*'s outstanding archery is so rare in the world; [he] used to go towards [against]

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<sup>115</sup> Wen *hou* is Lü Bu's title of nobility.

<sup>116</sup> In ancient Chinese legends, *fenghuang* 鳳凰 are the king of birds. The male is called *feng*, and the female is called *huang*.

<sup>117</sup> A type of long handle melee weapon, which combines a straight blade and curved blade(s) perpendicular to the straight one.

<sup>118</sup> *Guan* is a type of fort usually built in a key battle passage, surrounded by mountains and/or rivers.

<sup>119</sup> After Qin, *zhuhou* sometimes designates powerful local governors. Here it refers to the warlords allied against Dong Zhuo.

<sup>120</sup> In ancient China, people thought the virtue of courage is related to the gallbladder.

<sup>121</sup> 溫侯呂布世無比，雄才四海誇英偉。護軀銀鎧砌龍鱗，束髮金冠簪雉尾。參差寶帶獸平吞，錯落錦袍飛鳳起。龍駒跳踏起天風，畫戟熒煌射秋水。出關搦戰誰敢當？諸侯膽裂心惶惶。SGYY, 5.47-48.

*yuanmen* 轅門<sup>122</sup> to defuse a crisis alone.<sup>123</sup>

[He] really can despise Houyi 後羿<sup>124</sup> by shooting down the sun; [his ability] to make the ape cry absolutely surpasses [Yang 養] Youji 由基.<sup>125</sup>

At the place where [his] bow [with a bowstring made of tiger tendons] was drawn; at the time when [his] arrow with eagle feathers arrived.

The leopard tail<sup>126</sup> is swaying [in the wind] while the arrow penetrates the *huaji*; a hundred thousand powerful troops [then] take off [their] combat suits.<sup>127</sup>

A famous Chinese idiom says: “A wise man certainly will be wrong at least once after making a thousand decisions; a stupid man certainly will be right at least once after making a thousand decisions”.<sup>128</sup> Zhuge Liang, the wisest man in *Yanyi*, does make mistakes. On the other hand, although Lü Bu is a typical example of being

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<sup>122</sup> The outer door of the military camp was called *yuanmen*.

<sup>123</sup> In chapter 16, the powerful warlord Yuan Shu 袁術 orders his high ranking commander Ji Ling 紀靈 to attack Liu Bei. Lü Bu attempts to mediate between the two belligerent parties by making a bet with them. If he can hit the small curved blade on his *huaji* from 150 *bu* 步 (length unit approximately equivalent to 1.4–1.6 meters), they must agree to stop fighting. Lü Bu succeeds, and he successfully defuses the military conflict. See *SGYY*, 16.142-143.

<sup>124</sup> Houyi was a famous marksman in ancient Chinese legends. It is said that there once were ten suns, which dried the earth. Houyi shot down nine of them, and saved the world.

<sup>125</sup> Yang Youji was a person from Chu 楚 in the Chunqiu period, and was regarded as the best marksman in ancient China. In the folk legends, Chu *wang* had a white ape, which could easily catch the arrows shot at it. Chu *wang* once asked Yang Youji to shoot the animal. The ape held a post and started to cry after Youji simply pressed his bow.

<sup>126</sup> The tail was usually hung on the flag of the chief-commander.

<sup>127</sup> 溫侯神射世間稀，曾向轅門獨解危。落日果然欺後羿，號猿直欲勝由基。虎筋弦響弓開處，雕羽翅飛箭到時。豹子尾搖穿畫戟，雄兵十萬脫征衣，*SGYY*, 16.143.

<sup>128</sup> 智者千慮，必有一失；愚者千慮，必有一得。 *SJ*, 92.2618.

“brave and powerful, but unwise” (*you yong wu mou* 有勇無謀), sometimes he makes wise decisions. The most famous example is the one described in the above poem. At this time, Yuan Shu is more powerful than both Lü Bu and Liu Bei. Yuan Shu decides to eliminate Liu Bei first. Before attacking Liu Bei, Yuan Shu deliberately bribes Lü Bu to keep him neutral. If Yuan Shu defeats Liu Bei, his next target probably will be Bu. Therefore, after accepting Yuan Shu’s bribes, Lü Bu still decides to help Liu Bei to maintain the balance of power, which is definitely a wise choice.

In the battle of Fancheng, Yu Jin is also captured by Guan Yu. Unlike Pang De, he chooses to surrender. However, *Yanyi* does not obliterate his previous achievement. In chapter 16, Cao Cao’s Qingzhou troops have robbed civilians. Yu Jin thus suppresses them. Qingzhou troops go to Cao Cao to accuse Yu Jin of rebelling. At this time, Cao Cao is engaging another warlord, Zhang Xiu 張繡. Therefore, Yu Jin does not hurry to explain himself, but instead builds a camp to defend Zhang Xiu first. He says: “Defending [myself] against the charge is a small matter. Driving back the enemy is a great matter.”<sup>129</sup> Knowing his words, Cao Cao generously rewards him.

In chapter 43, before the battle of Chibi 赤壁,<sup>130</sup> Sun Quan’s *zhongchen* 重臣<sup>131</sup> Zhang Zhao 張昭 suggests that Sun Quan surrender. In chapter 82, after Sun Quan has submitted to Wei, Cao Pi sends his envoy Xing Zhen 邢貞 to confer the title of

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<sup>129</sup> 分辯小事，退敵大事. *SGYY*, 16.150.

<sup>130</sup> A decisive battle took place in the thirteenth year of Han Jian’an (208 C.E.). At this battle, the allied forces of Sun Quan and Liu Bei defeated Cao Cao, and halted his drive to conquer Tianxia.

<sup>131</sup> *Zhongchen* refers to a *chen* who holds an important position with heavy responsibilities.

Wu Wang 吳王 on Sun Quan. Xing Zhen does not get out of his carriage when entering the city gate of Sun's capital, which is an insolent behavior. Zhang Zhao stands up, and reprimands him: "Etiquette should be respectfully complied with. Laws should be strictly performed. Jun dares to be so overweening. Does [Jun] think that Jiangnan 江南<sup>132</sup> does not have a *cun* 寸<sup>133</sup> square size blade?"<sup>134</sup> Xing Zhen then immediately exits his carriage. In the above two examples, Zhang Zhao behaves quite differently. *Yanyi* chose to include both of these incidents in the description of events, rather than selectively record either one.

In the novel, the image of Xu Chu is that of a valiant commander. However, an anecdote in Chapter 66 shows that he is not merely a brave and strong man. On one occasion, Cao Cao is drunk while his *congdi* 從弟<sup>135</sup> Cao Ren 曹仁 is summoned to meet with him. Cao Ren wants to enter Cao Cao's room, but is stopped by Xu Chu, who is standing guard at the door. Cao Ren flies into a rage, and says to Xu Chu: "I am a member of the house of Cao. How dare you stop [me]?"<sup>136</sup> Xu Chu replies:

Although *jiangjun* is close [in terms of consanguinity], [*jiangjun*] is a local officer charged with the responsibility to guard.<sup>137</sup> Although Xu Chu is distant [in terms of consanguinity],

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<sup>132</sup> Jiangnan refers to the area south of Changjiang, which was controlled by Sun Quan at that time.

<sup>133</sup> *Cun* is a traditional Chinese length unit. Ten *cun* are equivalent to one *chi*.

<sup>134</sup> 禮無不敬，法無不肅，而君敢自尊大，豈以江南無方寸之刃耶？ *SGYY*, 82.701. Zhang Zhao threatens to kill Xing Zhen by a knife if he rejects to immediately get off the carriage.

<sup>135</sup> *Congdi* is the younger male relative of a person who has the same grandfather and/or great grandfather but different father.

<sup>136</sup> 吾乃曹氏宗族，汝何敢阻當耶？ *SGYY*, 66.577.

<sup>137</sup> Cao Ren was responsible for guarding Jingzhou at that time.

[Chu is] serving as an internal security official. Zhugong 主公<sup>138</sup> is drunk and lying in the principle room. [Chu] dares not to let [*jiangjun*] in.<sup>139</sup>

These words are decent and reasonable. Then Cao Ren dares not enter.

## CONCLUSION

In short, a main theme throughout the *Yanyi* is *zhongyi*. *Yanyi* reveres Liu Bei and belittles Cao Cao because the former meets the requirements of *zhongyi* while the later does not. *Zhongyi* is used as a single standard for character evaluation in the novel. Hence, although it has a very clear political stance of revering Liu and belittling Cao, it is quite objective and neutral in evaluating historical figures from different camps. Whoever meets the criteria of *zhongyi*, even a minor character, is regarded as a hero and is praised in the novel. *Yanyi* successfully characterizes many rich and vivid characters by combing historical and fictional contents. In *Yanyi*, the positive characters are not perfect. They usually have outstanding qualities but also clear weaknesses. For the negative characters, *Yanyi* strongly criticizes and satirizes them but also describes their excellences. I think they are the key reasons for the enduring appeal of *Yanyi*.

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<sup>138</sup> Zhugong is a respectful form of address for one's master.

<sup>139</sup> 將軍雖親，乃外藩鎮守之官；許褚雖疏，現充內侍。主公醉臥堂上，不敢放入。SGYY, 66.577.

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## CHINESE ABSTRACT

### 《三國演義》研究—政治立場、人物評價以及人物塑造

本文旨在對中國四大文學名著之一的《三國演義》進行研究，就其政治立場、人物評價

以及人物塑等三個方面進行了討論分析。本文質疑了對《三國演義》擁劉反操立場的傳統解釋，提出此書的政治立場是基於“忠義”而非血統或仁德。本文認為儘管此書帶有鮮明的政治立場，其對歷史人物的評價卻相當客觀。書中人物形象的塑造頗為成功。主要角色形象都顯得豐滿生動而非刻板平庸和臉譜化。無論是“正面”還是“反面”角色都有其顯著的優點和缺點。

關鍵詞：《三國演義》、政治立場、忠義、人物評價、人物塑造

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