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Cosmic Foreordination and Human Commitment

The Tragic Volition in *Three Kingdoms*



CONSTANTINE TUNG

Three Kingdoms is a great tragedy that depicts the hero's fabulous defiance of cosmic foreordination. Linkages between the human world, cosmic design and the cyclical movement of the Five Agents (*wuxing*)—wood, fire, earth, metal, and water—play a decisive role in the hero's life in *Three Kingdoms*. The cyclical movement of the Five Agents manifests itself in history and in dynastic successions. A man's destiny is affected, though not necessarily determined, by the movement of the constellations, by the position and brightness of his star in the heavens, and by the order of succession of the Five Agents. The Chinese cosmic-human linkage begins with the Great Ultimate (*Taiji*), which consists of the Way (*Dao*) and gives rise to yin and yang. Interactions between yin and yang generate the Five Agents that in turn produce and sustain all matters, including the affairs of humankind. Unique signs from heaven manifest through unusual happenings on earth, therefore it is important for humans to understand the meaning of cosmic revelations and to chart a course of action accordingly. In *Three Kingdoms*, the Han dynasty belongs to fire, and fire is to be displaced by the agent earth, to which Cao Cao belongs. The leitmotif of the *Three Kingdoms* tragedy is the hero making the choice between following cosmic foreordination and executing his moral obligation.

Cosmic foreordination reveals the inevitable course of the future, but it differs from fate as it is presented in a Greek tragedy. Cosmic ordainment allows the hero to make choices so as to steer away from disaster. Cyclical successions of the Five Agents and the movement of the constellations are beyond the control of the human will, but are comprehensible to human intelligence. The hero makes

his choice and charters an appropriate course for the future. Cosmic foreordination is neutral, but the hero's choice gives meaning to his existence. *Three Kingdoms*, therefore, is a grand epic on the heroes' efforts to map their own courses in a world that is already charted by cosmic will (*tianyi*).

The opening statement of *Three Kingdoms*, "The Empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide," characterizes the novel's tragic theme.¹ The heroes and villains act and contend at a time when disintegration of the Empire is preordained. The hero's success or failure depends on his response to cosmic will. *Three Kingdoms* is not a neutral work of art; it takes stands, politically and morally, that define heroes and villains. The novel creates the most admired and beloved heroes in Chinese literature, (namely, Liu Bei, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Zhuge Liang),² and the most infamous antagonist or villain (Cao Cao). The heroes commit themselves to a noble cause that unfortunately runs against the cycle of the Five Agents and the movements of the stars. The *Three Kingdoms* tragedy is the failure of the hero's noble commitment and of his defiance of the cosmic foreordination, but the meaning of this tragedy is ascribed to the hero's ethical principles and moral courage.

The motif of the *Three Kingdoms* tragedy, in the Hegelian ideal, is the hero's choice between equal values, not merely between good and evil. A Hegelian tragedy focuses on the hero's specific action and response. The significance in tragedy, as Hegel sees it, is not suffering as such but its causes. Aristotelian pity and fear are not necessarily tragic pity and fear to Hegel, whose definition of tragedy is focused on a conflict of ethical substance. This is the substance of the *Three Kingdoms* heroes' tragedy. Although aware of the cosmic preordination and historical cycle that decrees the empire is at its end, the *Three Kingdoms* heroes, nevertheless, make their political choices based on their moral convictions. They fail and are destroyed because their actions run against cosmic preordination. Their character flaws, indeed, make the tragedy a more intimate human experience, but often these flaws of the heroes are manifestations of cosmic will.

In chapter 14, "Cao Cao Moves the Emperor to Xudu" (Cao Mengde yijia xing Xudu), the cosmic sign shows its decisive and favorable influence upon the antagonist's decision-making. This cosmic sign is perceived to be heaven's sanction of Cao Cao's political aspirations. Thus, Cao Cao's act to place the emperor under his control is a cosmically sanctioned move. Cao Cao's action is an ironic revelation that the antagonist's ambition coincides with the cosmic will, while the novel's morals stand against the usurper. The heroes regard moving the emperor to Xudu as an act of betrayal, but the villain's accession to the supreme power in the empire is cosmically blessed. The conflict between the hero and the villain, therefore, is the hero's conscious defiance of cosmic will.

The future course of the contention is thereupon determined. The heroes—Liu Bei, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhuge Liang, and Jiang Wei—defy cosmic foreordination, which is personified in Cao Cao, the antagonist. This is a conflict between the villain, chosen by cosmic design as founder of a new political order, and the

heroes, who are committed to a moral and political cause, the restoration of the Han. The *Three Kingdoms* heroes' commitment to the restoration of the Han is affirmed with their unswerving loyalty (*zhong*) to the empire, and this loyalty is solidified through the very personal brotherhood (*yi*). Brotherhood is the most highly regarded human relationship in the novel. Loyalty and brotherhood are the ethical principles adhered to by the *Three Kingdoms* heroes.

The *Three Kingdoms* heroes are doomed to fail in their struggles. Robert W. Corrigan says in his discussion of Sophoclean drama that the tragic view of life begins by insisting that heroes accept the inevitable doom of their fate, and that this fact is the mainspring of all tragic drama. While the hero may have to face and accept the reality of necessity, he also has an overpowering need to give a meaning to his fate. If man's fate, no matter how frightening, has no meaning, then why struggle?³ The *Three Kingdoms* heroes understand the meaning of their action. The Sophoclean hero cannot escape from the tragic fate in *Oedipus the King*, but the *Three Kingdoms* hero makes his choice in spite of cosmic foreordination. The *Three Kingdoms* hero makes the choice, according to his free will, between adherence to the Daoist passive acceptance of inevitability (as Zhuge Liang does before Liu Bei's three visits), and taking the Confucian route of active involvement, (as Zhuge Liang does after Liu Bei's third visit).

Zhuce Liang and his Daoist friends know the consequence of defying cosmic foreordination. This tragic recognition is evident in Liu Bei's efforts to entreat Zhuge Liang. Sima Hui, a wise Daoist, responds to Liu Bei's inquiry about Crouching Dragon (Zhuge Liang) by comparing Zhuge Liang to the greatest statesmen of antiquity, Jiang Ziya and Zhang Liang. Comparing Zhuge Liang to the great statesmen in history instead of Daoist immortals is convincing evidence of Zhuge Liang's and his Daoist friend's secular concerns and aspirations. When Sima Hui learns that Xu Shu recommends Zhuge Liang to Liu Bei, he exclaims: "Why did Yuanzhi [the alias of Xu Shu] drag him out into this troubling business?" (37.308). This comment foretells a tragic event. As Sima Hui leaves, he reiterates his tragic premonition: "Alas, Crouching Dragon has found his lord but not the right time!" Sima Hui recognizes the futility of human struggles against the cosmic design at a particular historic moment (*tianshi*).

On one of his visits to Crouching Dragon, Liu Bei meets Zhuge Liang's friend Cui Zhouping. Cui Zhouping's response is illuminating:

My lord, you are set to bring the chaos to an end. This is your benevolent intention, but since ancient times, chaos and order have come and gone unpredictably. When the High Ancestor (Emperor Gao Zu) killed the white serpent and led the righteous uprising to destroy the tyrannous Qin, it began the transition from chaos to order. It was followed by two hundred years of peace and prosperity. Then, Wang Mang usurped the throne and the empire again moved from order to chaos. Emperor Guang Wu restored the empire and led us out of chaos and back to order and to peace for the people lasting two hundred years. Now wars and

uprisings are again all around us. This is a time that we are moving from order into chaos, which will not end quickly. General, you wish to have Kongming to change the cosmic courses, and to mend the sky and earth. I am afraid it is not easy but only a waste of your mind and efforts. Don't you know that "one enjoys ease by following heaven, and one labors in vain by opposing it" and that "One can neither ignore one's fate nor can one fight against it"? (37.310)

Cui Zhouping illustrates the tragic notion of the futility of men's attempts to reverse cosmic foreordination and historical cycles. Cui Zhouping is no ordinary Daoist hermit; he is also an expert on warfare. In one of the final battles between the novel's last hero, Jiang Wei, and the Wei general Deng Ai, Deng Ai is stymied by Jiang Wei's battle formation based on Kongming's "Eight-Fold Position" (*bazhen*). Jiang Wei moves his *bazhen* swiftly into the "Long Snake Rolls Up the Earth" (*chang she juandi zhen*) battle position and succeeds in encircling Deng Ai who does not understand Jiang Wei's battle order. Another Wei force, led by Sima Wang, saves Deng Ai from annihilation. Asked how he knows Jiang Wei's battle order, Sima Wang tells Deng Ai: "When I was young, I studied at Jingnan, and became a friend with Cui Zhouping and Shi Guangyuan [another friend of Kongming], and we had studied this battle formation" (113.934). Zhuge Liang's Daoist friends all have worldly expertise, but they, except Zhuge Liang, are wise enough to remain aloft from intervening in the preordained course of the cosmic. This is Zhuge Liang's tragedy.

Cui Zhouping advises Liu Bei that a "wise" person should understand and accept heaven's course for his survival and peace. Liu Bei responds: "What you have said is certainly wise, but I am a scion of the Han and I am committed to restore the House of Han. How can I submit myself to fate?" (37.310). This noble choice eventually leads the hero to his disastrous defeat. The *Three Kingdoms* heroes' defiance of cosmic foreordination leads them into those areas of experience where man is at the limits of his sovereignty. Yet, they are determined to map out their own universe and to restore the Empire, and it leads to their utmost defeat.

For Zhuge Liang, Daoist escapism never entirely replaces Confucian commitment, and he often compares himself to Guan Zhong and Yue Yi, two famous historical statesmen. His Confucian sense of commitment eventually overcomes his Daoist escapism when he meets Liu Bei. In other words, Zhuge Liang's Confucian ethics and secular aspirations overcome his Daoist wisdom. Zhuge Liang's nickname, Crouching Dragon, denotes the hero's ambivalence between Daoist retreat and Confucian sense of duty, and this Confucian commitment eventually moves the Crouching Dragon out from his reclusive hiding place.

However, there is an equally powerful and more personal factor that obliges Zhuge Liang to come out of his hermitage. It is the very personal *yi*. In *Three Kingdoms*, *yi* denotes one's loyalty to the person who understands and appreciates one's value, and it constitutes the solid base of the brotherhood exemplified in the union of Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei. *Yi* is a value that *Three Kingdoms* puts higher

than *zhong*.”⁴ Liu Bei’s persistent visits are a manifestation of his utmost appreciation, sincerity, and trust, and these qualities ultimately move Kongming.

Zhuge Liang’s famous “Response at Longzhong” (Longzhong dui) demonstrates not only Crouching Dragon’s comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the political situation of the world; it also shows that this crouching dragon already has strategic plans for rebuilding the disintegrating empire. Kongming is moved by Liu Bei’s sincerity, and he also finds that Liu Bei’s commitment meets his long-harbored wish and dream; in the words of Xu Shu, he [Kongming] often “compares himself to Guan Zhong and Yue Yi” (36.304).

In the “Response at Longzhong” Kongming maps out his geopolitical strategy for the restoration of the house of Liu, but he is aware of the unfavorable cycle of history and the cosmic ordainment. Of cosmic ordainment (*tianshi*) and human efforts (*renmou*), the two elements that Kongming attributes to Cao Cao’s success, Kongming advises Liu Bei to concentrate on the latter. Kongming, nevertheless, accepts the task, despite his keen awareness of the inauspicious times and cosmic preordination. His Confucian secularism, his loyalty to the Han, and his gratitude for Liu Bei’s appreciation supersede his preoccupation with self-preservation in the chaotic world.

Unlike them, Cao Cao, the archantagonist of *Three Kingdoms*, is blessed by the cosmic foreordination that manifests its decisive mystical favor at Huarongdao. Kongming’s assignment of Guan Yu to try to ambush Cao Cao at Huarongdao is his attempt to wait out the cosmic ordainment. One may wonder why Kongming does not assign Zhang Fei or Zhao Yun to wait for and finish the desperate villain at Huarongdao. Liu Bei knows well that Guan Yu, with his strong sense of *yi*, will not be able to carry out this important mission to finish the villain. Kongming tells Liu Bei: “Last night I studied the constellations, and the traitor Cao’s death was not shown there. So let Yunchang [Guan Yu] discharge the personal favor (*renqing*) [he owes to Cao Cao]” (49.409).

Clearly, Kongming knows that Cao Cao will not perish, no matter who is assigned to deal with him at Huarongdao. To assign Guan Yu to do this is Kongming’s wise plan for the future. He feels that, after Huarongdao, Guan Yu’s loyalty will not be compromised by his commitment to *yi* and indebtedness to favors (*en*) he owes to the archrival of Liu Bei. Kongming can only act according to the cosmic design by modifying his plan, and hoping for the cosmic signs to change.

The victory over Cao Cao at Red Cliff ironically marks the beginning of the greatest tragic episode in the novel. Kongming, the engineer of the Red Cliff victory, unwittingly leads his state toward catastrophe. Kongming, the wisest hero of all in *Three Kingdoms*, undermines his own grand strategy with each of his many clever moves and victories against his Wu opponents. The accumulation of the successful moves made by Kongming ends with the defeat of the mighty forces led by Liu Bei at the hands of young Lu Xun. It is a tragic drama of volcanic passion for revenge, and it is also a great tragic irony of men’s struggle against the cosmic. Does Kongming have a choice?

After the battle of Red Cliff, Kongming takes Nanjun and other cities from the Cao forces without a fight, while Zhou Yu fights and defeats Cao's troops after a bitter struggle. Kongming then spoils Zhou Yu's plots repeatedly, and finally so angers Zhou Yu that he dies at the young age of 36. Although the novel portrays Zhou Yu as a less sympathetic contender, all these victories contradict the strategy of Kongming outlined in his "Response at Longzhong," that is, the principle of forming an alliance with Sun Quan against the North. Kongming, as wise as he might be, violates his own grand strategy and offends Zhou Yu and Sun Quan by taking the strategic Jingzhou region, which Zhou Yu and Sun Quan consider theirs.

Before leaving for Xichuan, Kongming reminds Guan Yu of the importance of maintaining good relations with Sun Quan. However, after piling repeated humiliations upon Sun Quan, Kongming's policy is now on very shaky ground. Kongming certainly does not have alternatives. Liu Bei, the only major contender without a home, needs a home base. Jingzhou, unfortunately, is the only available place, and its strategic location attracts all contenders' desires to possess it. Cao Cao's defeat at Red Cliff takes him out of contention for the time being, but at the same time Kongming turns his strategic ally into his adversary. The chain of cause and effect puts Kongming into an inextricable situation, and he is compelled to subordinate his strategic design to immediate tactical necessity. Kongming's wisdom cannot alter the historical and cosmic courses, and he is moving toward catastrophe.

The hero's flaws and errors manifest cosmic preordination, and they also heighten the emotional intensity of the tragic volition. The heroes are personally responsible for their failures and/or deaths. When Kongming must leave Jingzhou for Xichuan to assist Liu Bei, he entrusts the defense of Jingzhou to Guan Yu; in order to avoid warfare on two fronts he instructs Guan Yu to follow the strategic principle of "North, resist Cao Cao; East, peace with Sun Quan" (63.523). However, Guan Yu fails to abide by this strategic principle.

Arrogance is perceived in *Three Kingdoms* as a fatal character flaw that always leads a hero or a villain to his defeat or death. Zhao Zilong, the nearly perfect hero in the novel, suffers his only defeat at the hand of an inexperienced and impetuous Wei general, Xiahou Mao, simply because of his momentary arrogance (chapter 92). Arrogance is Guan Yu's mortal flaw. His request to have a duel with Ma Chao (chapter 65) and his resentment at Huang Zhong's promotion to be his equal as one of the five "Tiger Generals" (chapter 73) evidence Guan Yu's only, but nevertheless fatal, defect, as Chen Shou comments in *Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo zhi*).⁵

This catastrophic defect emerges when Guan Yu antagonizes Sun Quan with his insulting refusal of Sun Quan's proposal to have his son marry Guan's daughter. Guan Yu knows Sun Quan's long-cherished intention to take Jingzhou, but his arrogant temperament keeps him from seeing the necessity of diplomatic flexibility. The young and unknown Wu commander Lu Xun takes the advantage of Guan Yu's defect by flattering the great general with extreme humility, and he succeeds in lowering Guan Yu's alertness. This leads the great hero to his defeat and death.

Though his military situation is deteriorating hopelessly, Guan Yu's faith in *yi* remains. When he confronts Cao Cao's general Xu Huang in battle, the beleaguered hero asks Xu Huang: "Our friendship is indeed deeper than any other, but why have you driven my son time and again to the limit?" Guan Yu is utterly surprised when Xu Huang turns to his troops and cried out: "A thousand pieces of gold to the man who takes Yunchang's head!" Guan Yu asks: "Gongming, why do you say this?" Xu Huang answers: "Today this concerns the state, I cannot neglect my public duty because of our personal relations" (76.623). While saying this, Xu Huang charges toward Guan Yu.

Guan Yu's adherence to *yi* fails him again when he pleads to the Wu commander Lü Meng in the name of this value. Lü Meng replies via Guan's messenger: "My friendship with General Guan is personal, but today I am under the command of my superior, I am unable to do as I wish" (76.625). *Yi*, as Guan Yu understands it, transcends the line between enemy and friend. Guan Yu's display of *yi* over *zhong* at Huarongdao earns him great admiration of the readers, but ultimately *yi* fails to save the hero.

Liu Bei's death is most remarkable, and it makes him an Aristotelian tragic hero who at the moment of his death recognizes and repents the fatal mistake that leads him to disaster. Liu Bei's rejection of the advice by Kongming, Zhao Yun, and the others not to avenge Guan Yu's death begins the novel's most dramatic and tragic episode. Liu Bei's passion for revenge eclipses his rational judgment, undermines his grand design for unifying the empire, and costs him his own life. The bond of brotherhood takes precedence over the fortune of his new empire. Deeply humiliated by his defeat, Liu Bei, instead of returning to Chengdu, the capital of his empire, remains at Baidi ill.

Liu Bei's repentance of his mistake is at first revealed in dealing with his general Huang Quan's surrender to the Wei when advancing Wu forces blocked Huang's retreat. Huang Quan is convinced that Liu Bei will not persecute him and his family because of their mutual trust, *zhong* and *yi*. Liu Bei's not persecuting Huang Quan, however, is not entirely due to his adherence to *yi*, as Huang Quan believes. It is Liu Bei's first show of repentance for his mistake: "It is I who have done wrong to Huang Quan, not Huang Quan to me" (85.693).

Touching Kongming's back, Liu Bei speaks his last words: "Since I had you as prime minister, I was fortunate to have accomplished the quest for the empire. How could I know that I was so foolish for not listening to your words, and ended in this defeat all by myself? I am sick because of my remorse, and I am now dying . . ." (85.695). These words reveal the hero's deep sense of humility and tortured repentance for his mistake. He holds himself responsible for the worst military defeat of his empire and the worst in the novel. His turbulent emotion and reflective moral understanding elevate Liu Bei to the status of an Aristotelian tragic hero.

The deaths of Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and finally, Liu Bei conclude the tragic prediction stated in the very beginning of the novel's first chapter, "Feasting in the Peach Garden, the Three Heroes Pledged in a Sworn Brotherhood" (Yan taoyuan

haojie san jieyi). This Sworn Brotherhood (*jieyi*) episode establishes the major moral principle and is a powerful theme of the novel. The pledge connects Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei in a relationship that has commanded admiration and attracted imitations for centuries in China. However, their passion for this sworn brotherhood leads to the tragic conclusion of the novel's three most admired and beloved heroes.

The tragedy of the three sworn brothers corresponds to the Hegelian interpretation of tragedy. It is a conflict between the powers that rule the world of man's will and man's ethical substance, action. Hegel speaks of "equally justified" powers, and it is, therefore, tragic that observance of one would violate the other. To Liu Bei, Zhang Fei, and Guan Yu, loyalty to their sworn brothers and loyalty to the Empire are equally justified values. Guan Yu's letting the desperate Cao Cao go and Liu Bei's avenging his sworn brother's death exemplify the Hegelian view of conflict.⁶

Passion for brotherhood destroys Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei, but defiance of cosmic preordination characterizes Zhuge Liang's tragedy. Wiser than the three fallen heroes, Zhuge Liang, like his friends who choose to remain in reclusion, understands that the cosmic movement is running against the cause for the restoration of the house of Liu, the Han dynasty. Yet, he accepts the call for his service to the impossible but noble cause.

When Kongming presents his "Petition for the First Expedition (*xian chushi biao*)," Grand Historian Qiao Zhou advises against the campaign, because he observes that "the constellation signs to the north indicate the height of vigor and the stars over the North are doubly bright." This is not the right time for war against the Wei, Qiao Zhou argues. Then he turns to Kongming: "Prime Minister, you have profound knowledge of the constellations, why do you insist to do so [against the cosmic will]?" "Heaven's way changes unpredictably, how can we hold ourselves to it?" Kongming responds (91.753). Qiao Zhou is a unique character in *Three Kingdoms*. He understands cosmic foreordination and signs in the constellations, yet he does not withdraw from the secular world as many wise Daoist recluses do. He serves in the Shu-Han imperial court, but avoids committing himself to the causes that violate cosmic foreordinations. He advises the Latter Emperor (Hou-zhu), Liu Shan, to surrender not because of his lack of loyalty, but because he reads and follows the cosmic signs.

Kongming's answer to Qiao Zhou reveals the dilemma between following cosmic dictates and fulfilling his commitment. Kongming only wants the unpredictable changes of the way of heaven (*tiandao*) to turn to his favor, and he is "*for the time being* [*italics are mine*] going to position the forces in Hanzhong and to watch the enemy's movements before taking action" (91.753). The tone suggests Kongming's uncertainty in his response to Qiao Zhou's remonstrance. His answer implies a compromise between his knowing the unfavorable sign of heaven's will and his commitment to the empire's reunification. Above all, his sense of *yi* obliges him to fulfill the late Emperor's trust in him.

When Kongming is ready for another expedition against Wei in AD 234, Qiao Zhou speaks again opposing Kongming's move, because of the unfavorable sign in the constellations. Sima Yi, Kongming's most formidable adversary, also reports to Cao Rui, the Wei emperor, about the same heavenly sign that is unfavorable to Kongming's offensive. He concludes: "Kongming indulges too much in his own talent and ability and acts against cosmic foreordination. He is defeating and destroying himself" (102.843-4). Sima Yi's prediction of Kongming's defeat is soon proved to be correct.

Zhuge Liang's tragedy—his failure to conquer Wei and his untimely death—results from the combined factors of unfavorable cosmic foreordination, his personal misjudgment, and the deterioration of human harmony (*renhe*) in the imperial court. Human harmony is a factor that Kongming in his "Response at Longzhong" considers vital for Liu Bei to compensate for Cao Cao's having "Heaven's time (*tian-shi*)" and for Sun Quan's "geographic advantages (*dili*)."

Changes in Kongming's temperament from his early confidence, optimism, humor, and sometimes playful and cruel mischief to impatience and easily aroused anger after the failure of his first expedition against the Wei are reflections of the hero's frustration. Kongming's frustration comes not only from unsuccessful battles against Sima Yi, but also from his realization that he is running out of time. His confidence in dealing with Zhou Yu is shown with such expressions as "smile" (*xiao*) and "laugh aloud" (*da xiao*), expressions that demonstrate the hero's playfulness against his jealous and suspicious opponent. Confidence and optimism also inspire Kongming's theatrical talent. Kongming is a skillful actor (so is Liu Bei, by following Kongming's choreography), a talent exemplified in his dealing with Lu Su, who comes time and again demanding the returning of Jingzhou to Wu. At Zhou Yu's funeral, Kongming's eulogy and theatrical crying move all the hostile Wu officials and generals. Only Pang Tong, the Young Phoenix, sees through Kongming's drama and histrionics. Kongming "gives a big laugh (*da xiao*)" when Pang Tong points out to the deceptive performer this cruel theatricality. In fact, Kongming has plotted Zhou Yu's death. In the last round of the duel, Kongming laughed heartily and told Liu Bei that, "Zhou Yu is near his death. . . . When Zhou Yu comes, if he doesn't die, he will be mostly dead" (56.462).

Kongming's mood and self-assurance begin to change after the loss of JiETING. The presentation of emotions in *Three Kingdoms*, as in many novels of action, is simple. The most frequently used descriptions of moods are "smiling or laughing" (*xiao*), "laughing aloud or laughing heartily" (*da xiao*), "angry" (*nu*), and "furious" (*da nu*). In chapter 97, during the attack on Chencang, Kongming is "furious" four times even though he is about to win the battle. Later, he is also "greatly surprised" (*da jing*) by the loss of two of his generals and the defeat of his forces. After the loss of JiETING, Kongming confronts an increasingly difficult situation from without and within, and yet his loyalty and commitment remain unswerving.

During his last campaign against Wei, Grand Historian Qiao Zhou again tells Kongming of unfavorable constellation signs and natural omens for his new

war. Again, Kongming rejects Qiao Zhou's advice: "Under the vital trust of the late Emperor, I should only do my best to fight the traitors. How can I give up the important cause of the Empire because of baseless evil omens?" (102.843). This is the hero's defiance of the limitations of being a man.

Previously, when fighting Cao Cao at Huarongdao, Kongming has modified his scheme in accord with cosmic will. Now Kongming attempts to prolong his life by defying the inevitability of cosmic will and he fails. Kongming's death concludes his struggle against the supreme will of the cosmos, the heavens. The hero has attempted to manipulate and to intervene in cosmic will in order to accomplish his unfulfilled commitment. Thus, Kongming is the only hero in *Three Kingdoms* who knowingly violates the will of heaven. Kongming's heroism and tragedy are his defiance of the state of being human.

Jiang Wei, the last hero of the *Three Kingdoms*, concludes the tragic drama with his unyielding virtues, *zhong* and *yi*. Fighting first on the side of Wei, Jiang Wei surrenders to Kongming when he has nowhere to turn. Jiang Wei is portrayed as an extremely filial son. A man of such a virtue does not belong in the camp of the traitors. Jiang Wei's loyalty to Kongming is solidified through his deep gratitude to Kongming's appreciation and Kongming's understanding of his talent and usefulness. Kongming claims that he finally has someone who can succeed him, and Jiang Wei abides by Kongming's wish. Jiang Wei says before launching another invasion of Wei: "When the late prime minister was still in his hut, he mapped out the tripartite division of the world. He led six offensives from Qishan in order to take the Central Plain, but unfortunately he passed away before accomplishing the task. I am now bearing his trust, and I must dedicate myself to continue his will and to serve the empire" (110.913). *Yi* is the paramount foundation on which *zhong* manifests. Jiang Wei's commitment leads the hero to the most violent death of all.

The *Three Kingdoms* tragedy is the heroes' "failure to map their universe," in Corrigan's words. The Sanguo heroes find themselves in a world, the Han empire, that they believe their forefathers have governed, civilized, and charted well. However, in their time the empire is disintegrating and falling apart.

The heroes' action is ethical in substance, yet it counters foreordination, and is the root of tragedy in Hegel's terms. They do so with their noble devotion to two ethical principles: loyalty (*zhong*) and brotherhood (*yi*). The struggle between Cao Cao (who is favored by cosmic foreordination) and Liu Bei, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhuge Liang, and Jiang Wei (who act in human rebellion against cosmic foreordination) has multiple meanings. As Robert W. Corrigan sees in Greek drama, these heroes are doomed by fate, which, in *Three Kingdoms*, is cosmic foreordination. In the heroes' defiance of this inevitability, there is "the affirmation of tragedy" that "celebrates a kind of victory of man's spirit over his Fate."⁷ The *Three Kingdoms* heroes, "try nobly to impose a meaning on their own lives and on the world around them."⁸ Liu Bei, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhuge Liang, and Jiang Wei are doomed not simply because they have tragic flaws, but because they refuse to compromise with cosmic preordination. Joseph Wood Krutch's ideal of tragedy

affirms the meaning of the *Three Kingdoms* tragedy: “[I]t is that every real tragedy, however tremendous it may be, is an affirmation of faith in life, a declaration that even if God is not in his heaven, then at least Man is in his world. We accept gladly the outward defeats which it describes for the sake of the inward victories which it reveals.”⁹ *Three Kingdoms* is a monumental tragic novel. Its heroes’ commitments and actions are based on high ethical principles, and their tragic failures are testaments to their moral courage. These elements make the novel powerful and moving with lasting impact on its readers.

NOTES

My discussion is based on the 1953 edition of *Sanguo yanyi*, edited by Zuojia chubanshe bianjibu (the Editorial Department of the Writers Publishing House), (Beijing: Zhujia chubanshe, 1953). Translations of the text quotations are mine.

1. In its chapter 120, the novel concludes, “The empire, long united, must divide, long divided, must unite.” This signifies that the tragedy ends with the unification of the empire (*tianxia*), ruled by another house, the house of Sima.

2. I use both Zhuge Liang and his courtesy name Kongming alternatively in my discussion.

3. See Robert W. Corrigan, “Introduction: The Tragic Turbulence of Sophoclean Drama” in *Sophocles: Oedipus the King, Philoctetes, Electra, Antigone in Modern Translations*, ed. Robert Corrigan, 2nd ed. (New York: 1968), 11–27.

4. Professor Mu Qian, a noted historian, sees that Zhuge Liang’s willingness to serve under Liu Bei, though due to political conviction, is more inspired by the “sincere friendship” that Liu Bei demonstrates during his “Three Visits” to Zhuge Liang. See Mu Qian, *Zhongguo zhishifenzi* (Hong Kong: Zhongguo wenti chubanshe, 1951), 11.

5. See Chen Shou, “Guan, Zhang, Ma, Huang, Zhao zhuan, diliu: ping 關張馬黃趙傳第六：評,” in *Sanguo Zhi: Shu Shu*. Edition of reference is 8th ed. (Changsha: 1998), 757. In *Three Kingdoms*, Cao Cao’s advisor Cheng Yu says the same about Guan Yu’s strong sense of *yi* when they confront Guan Yu at Huarongdao. Cheng Yu asks Cao Cao to exploit Guan Yu’s *yi* so that they can get away (50.414). At this critical moment, the novel’s most esteemed virtue demonstrates its weakness.

6. Hegel’s writings on tragedy are scattered throughout his works. I draw here from *Hegel on Tragedy*, ed. Anne Paolucci and Henry Paolucci, (New York: Anchor Books, 1962).

7. Corrigan, “Introduction,” 15.

8. *Ibid.*, 27.

9. Joseph Wood Krutch, “The Tragic Fallacy,” in *European Theories of the Drama*, ed. Barrett Clark (New York: Crown, 1965), 520–21.