

Guan Yu's life after death

The religious and literary images of the Three Kingdoms hero Guan Yu

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Introduction

“The brave and reverent front general (關公)””, “Demon-subduing emperor across the three realms (關聖帝君)”, and the fabled “Lord of beautiful beards (美髯公)”. These are but a few of the many titles attributed to Three Kingdoms legend Guan Yu 關羽. Alongside his sworn brothers Liu Bei 劉備 and Zhang Fei 張飛, he strove to reunite the empire under the flag of the flailing Han dynasty. But roughly a thousand years after Guan Yu’s death, his image was reinvigorated as he came to be a religious figure. By the time the Three Kingdoms story took form in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, it is clear that the author wasn’t merely describing a historical figure, but rather a proper god. Interestingly enough, this deification of Guan Yu took place more or less alongside a resurgence of popular interest in the Three Kingdoms story. This raises a number of interesting questions. Why was it Guan Yu who ascended to this divine status, which was so much higher than that of the other famous characters? How did Guan Yu’s elevated status affect other characters in the story? What factors caused both Guan Yu worship and the Three Kingdoms story to surge as they did? It is for this reason that Guan Yu has long been a very popular object of study.

In this thesis, I will dedicate myself to answering such a question. Was the development of the Three Kingdoms narrative shaped by Guan Yu’s religious status? Was it the other way around, and did Guan Yu only manage to rise to his divine status due to the increased popularity the narrative was enjoying? Or did both come to pass due to a complicated interrelationship, rather than simply one’s influence on the other? In order to answer these questions, first I will give a general overview of Guan Yu’s role in the Three Kingdoms, and the general popular image of him, as well as a survey of the scholarship that is being done on him. Next, I will examine the four most important stages of development of the Three Kingdoms narrative, the *Records of the*

Three Kingdoms, the *Records of the Three Kingdoms in Plain Language*, various plays on the Three Kingdoms, and the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. This will allow me to establish how Guan Yu's literary image has evolved over time within the Three Kingdoms story. I will then take a look at how Guan Yu's religious image has developed over the years. I will do this through careful examination of a number of secondary sources dealing with Guan Yu's religious image. By combining the information these sources provide, I will give an overview of its change over the different dynasties, from which I will draw the conclusions relevant to my argument. Lastly, within the conclusion I will combine the findings from these two main parts, and make an effort at answering the question mentioned above.

1. Guan Yu and the Three Kingdoms

1.1 Guan Yu's popular image

The Three Kingdoms (184-280 AD) is a period of Chinese history during and subsequent to the Eastern Han 汉朝 dynasty (25-220 AD), and known as the start of the period of the *Six Dynasties (liu chao 六朝)*, which would last until the reunification of the land under the Sui 隋 dynasty in 589. During the greater part of this period, the land was split up between three rival factions, hence the name Three Kingdoms. These three factions were the Wei 魏 or Cao Wei 曹魏 under Cao Cao 曹操, the Shu 蜀 or Shu Han 蜀汉 under Liu Bei and the Wu 吴 or Eastern Wu 东吴 under Sun Quan 孙权. Eventually, the kingdom Wei was usurped by Sima Yan 司马炎, who founded the Jin 晋 kingdom and ultimately won the war, founding the Western Jin 西晋 dynasty (265-316 AD). Over the later imperial dynasties, the story of the Three Kingdoms has been heavily embellished, eventually to become the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* novel during the Ming 明 dynasty (1368-1644), which became one of the four classic Chinese novels. By this time the

story had attained massive popularity, and many of its characters became known throughout the land for their virtue, intelligence or bravery. One of these characters whose reputation took on a life of its own was Guan Yu.

Guan Yu, also known as Yunchang 雲長, was one of the leading generals of the Shu kingdom, and a confidant of the leader of Shu, Liu Bei, as was Zhang Fei. He was immensely strong and brave, and is known for having a strong sense of righteousness. He became known as one of the five top generals of Shu. After the Three Kingdoms period, a religious cult slowly developed around him, and by the time the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was published, his image had changed to that of a blazing paragon of virtue and righteousness. His sworn brotherhood with Liu Bei and Zhang Fei became one of the key points to the Three Kingdoms story, and his achievements were significantly embellished. What was known about his character was emphasized even more, and he became known as a brave and valiant fighter, with a nearly uncontrollable anger towards injustice, and a tendency towards pride and overconfidence. The same type of emphasis found its way onto some of the other characters, mainly those of Liu Bei, Zhang Fei, the Shu strategist Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 and their main enemy Cao Cao. Liu Bei became known as being honorable and benevolent, Zhang Fei as immensely powerful, but rash and battle-hungry, Zhuge Liang as calm, calculating, and, most importantly, supremely intelligent, and Cao Cao as ambitious and unrestrained, but still possessing a sense of honor. This in turn made its mark upon the religious scene around Guan Yu, which rose to even greater heights, and by the end of the Qing 清 dynasty (1644-1911) he enjoyed approximately as much popularity as Confucius.¹ Needless to say, this made him a very interesting subject of study.

1.2 Research on Guan Yu

¹ Duara (1988), p. 785

Since the 20th century, more and more research has been conducted on the changing image of Guan Yu. In the Republic of China (1912-1949) this led to two main theories. The first was led by Hu Shi 胡适, who, in his commentary to the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in 1922 said that Guan Yu as displayed in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* had become a basic image of a warrior, brave and strong, but vain and blind to greater strategies.² The second was led by Lu Xun 鲁迅, who, in his book *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue* 中国小说史略 ‘Concise history of the Chinese Novel’, argued the opposite, namely that in the *Romance* he is portrayed as a perfect man, with scarcely a flaw to his character.³ Most of the research on Guan Yu in the first half of the twentieth century revolved around these two main theories.⁴ After the People’s Republic of China (1949-present) was established, there arose more controversy about what Guan Yu represented. Some thought that he represented democracy, as he was a popular hero. Others thought that he represented the defective feudal system of his time.⁵ The research that was being done in this period was heavily subject to his implied historical and cultural background, and eventually came to somewhat of a standstill, as the People’s Republic of China tended to atheism under the influence of Marxism and Leninism, and Guan Yu’s religious background heavily impacted his status. It would be only in the 1990s that research on Guan Yu would be conducted within the PRC.⁶ In Taiwan, however, he was generally more respected, and as a result a lot of research was being conducted on him in Taiwan.⁷

Initially, this research based itself mainly on the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, since it provides the clearest image of Guan Yu. However, before long there was also much attention

2 Hu (1922) in Hong (1995), p. 2

3 Lu (1925) in Hong (1995), p. 3

4 Hong (1995), p. 3

5 Hong (1995), p. 4

6 Hong (1995), p. 9

7 Hong (1995), p. 6

being paid to the Yuan 元 dynasty (1271-1368) plays, in which the Three Kingdoms and Guan Yu were very popular. These plays are the first instances of narratives of the events of the Three Kingdoms, and were developed during one of the biggest surges of Guan Yu's religious status, making them very relevant to the development of his image.⁸ Naturally, research focused on these literary works are still appearing today, as it is to be expected with works of this magnitude that questions remain unanswered. Some of these works focus on the development of the Three Kingdoms story as a whole,⁹ where Guan Yu's case is simply one of the ways in which they argue how the story has developed over the years. Others deal specifically with Guan Yu and how his appearance and character has made its mark on the story.¹⁰ Nowadays, the general opinion of Guan Yu being displayed in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* as a perfect embodiment of virtue and righteousness remains prevalent. In the second half of the twentieth century there was also more research being done on the actual local religious customs involving Guan Yu, first mainly in Taiwan, but towards the 1990s also in the PRC,¹¹ and even in places outside of China, such as Japan, where Guan Yu as a religious figure had also spread before long.¹² Lastly, there were those concerned with the historical image-building of Guan Yu. Of these Huang (1968) is a very important one, since, as Hong (1995; 10) puts it, "this book could be called a pioneering work of research on Guan Gong 關公傳記研究"¹³. However, as Hong (1995) also points out, it should be kept in mind that most of this type of research was done during the 1960s and 1970s, times during which Taiwan was influenced by the Chinese Culture Renaissance movement, and Mainland China by the Cultural Revolution.¹⁴ A

8 Hong (1995), p. 7

9 See Li (2008)

10 See Lei (2010) and Lei (2009)

11 Hong (1995), p. 8-9

12 Hong (1995), p. 11

13 Hong (1995), p. 10

14 Hong (1995), p. 6

revitalization of this type of research is seen in such more recent research as Yan (2006), combining historical information and writings with local culture into a clear overview of Guan Yu's image change over the years, and Li (2011), which approaches the subject from a purely anthropological angle.

What I hope to add to this field of research by means of this thesis, is a more direct contrast of two of these main methods of approaching the subject of Guan Yu. By closely examining the three main different versions of the Three Kingdoms story, as well as the Yuan dynasty plays on the same subject, a clear literary image of Guan Yu is to be established, which is then contrasted with the religious image as it has been historically sculpted. This contrast will allow me to, as clearly as possible, define if and how these two images developed simultaneously, and to what extent these two processes of development were interdependent.

I: The literary image of Guan Yu

As mentioned above, in the following four chapters I will examine several episodes of the Three Kingdoms events in four different versions. These four versions are the Western Jin dynasty historical records *Sanguozhi* 三國志 '*Records of the Three Kingdoms*', hereafter referred to as '*Records*', the Yuan dynasty narrative *Sanguozhi Pinghua* 三國志平話 '*Records of the Three Kingdoms in Plain Language*', hereafter referred to as '*Plain Language*', the Yuan dynasty plays which followed closely upon the *Plain Language*, known as the *zaju* 雜劇 'assorted plays' and lastly the Ming/Qing dynasty novel *Sanguoyanyi* 三國演義 '*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*', hereafter referred to as '*Romance*'. First, I will provide a brief introduction to each of these versions.

The *Records* are the closest we have to a historical account of the Three Kingdoms period. It was written in the Western Jin dynasty, directly subsequent to the Three Kingdoms, by Chen Shou 陈寿 under order of the Jin court. As a result, even this account of the events in the Three Kingdoms is not completely objective, as it is a history as written by the victors. However, he was an inhabitant of the Shu kingdom, and had lived through its fall.¹⁵ Therefore, there might be additions to or eliminations from the actual events, but as of yet, we have no way of knowing. The records themselves are structured into the books of Wei, Shu and Wu, with a grand total of thirty records on Wei, sixteen on Shu and twenty on Wu. Every entry is dedicated either to a person or a collection of people. For example, Guan Yu's records share an entry with the others of the so-called Five Tiger Generals (Wu Hu Jiang 五虎将) Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun 赵云, Ma Chao 马超 and Huang Zhong 黄忠

Next up would be the Yuan dynasty narrative *Records of the Three Kingdoms in Plain Language*. This is the first attempt we know of to gather the *Records* from the Jin dynasty into one narrative. While it is unclear who exactly wrote it, it is commonly assumed that it was written by order of the Yuan court, possibly in an attempt to legitimize the Mongol dynasty.

This was not the only literary manifestation of the Three Kingdoms story in the Yuan dynasty. Alongside the *Plain Language*, the development of the Three Kingdoms story was reinforced by the so-called *zaju*, to which the Three Kingdoms were a very popular topic. This type of play mostly flourished during the Yuan, but was still very popular during the Ming. For the development of the image of Guan Yu, one might say that these plays have been even more influential than the *Plain Language* itself. Indeed, such sources as Zhang & Luo (1997) even state that the way the characters of the later *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (see below) are

¹⁵ Yan (2006), p. 75

portrayed is “like the classification by facial makeup in Peking opera 脸谱分类”¹⁶, referencing to the way an actor’s facial makeup often reflects their character’s temperament, moral views or personality in Chinese plays. Of those plays which have been recorded to this day, most authors are unknown, save for a few big names, such as Zhu Youdun 朱有墩 and Guan Hanqing 关汉卿.

The *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is the most well-known version of the Three Kingdoms story. It is currently ranked among the four Chinese classic novels, alongside the *Shuihuzhuan* 水浒传 ‘Water Margin’, *Xiyouji* 西游记 ‘Journey to the West’ and *Hongloumeng* 红楼梦 ‘Dream of the Red Chamber’. It was first published in 1522 as a 240-chapter version, named *Sanguozhi Tongsu Yanyi* 三国志通俗演义 ‘Common novelization of the *Records of the Three Kingdoms*’. Later, in the 17th century under the Qing dynasty, it was edited and brought back to a 120 double-chapter version, which is the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* as we know it today. For the sake of completion, I will be examining both versions in the following chapters. This is the most romanticized version of the story, and was inspired by the *Records*, the *Plain Language*, various plays from the Yuan dynasty onwards, local folklore, and, as I hope to establish later in this thesis, the development of the Guan Yu religious cult up to that point.

Since these different versions are mostly from different time periods and written in different literary genres, examining the change in narrative discourse between them will allow us a rather clear picture of how the Three Kingdoms narrative has developed over time. There are four episodes of the narrative that I will examine in each of these versions. Firstly, the introduction of Guan Yu and his making acquaintance with Liu Bei and Zhang Fei. This episode becomes a key event in the moral fabric of the story and the shaping of Guan Yu’s character in later versions. Secondly, Guan Yu’s brief service under Cao Cao. This episode is key in the

16 Zhang & Luo (1997) in Zhang (2011), p. 76

development of Guan Yu's persona, as he is caught between *yi* 义 'righteousness', repaying Cao Cao for treating him liberally, and *zhong* 忠 'loyalty', namely his personal allegiance to his sworn brother Liu Bei. Thirdly, a combined account of Guan Yu's efforts against the powerful warlord Lü Bu 吕布 and the so-called Single Sword meeting with Wu advisor Lu Su 鲁肃. These two episodes are both rather brief, but have been shifted significantly over the different versions of narrative, and have become very important to the development of Guan Yu's character. Lastly, his service as guardian of the province of Jingzhou 荆州 and his death. Guan Yu's death has been embellished significantly across the different versions, and needless to say it is also very important in establishing his image.

2. Guan Yu's introduction and acquaintance with Liu Bei and Zhang Fei

In the later stages of the Three Kingdoms story, the sworn brotherhood between Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei is a central topic, and part of the foundation upon which the idea of *zhongyi* 忠义 'loyalty and righteousness', which Guan Yu would come to symbolize, is built. The main plot in each of the versions is that Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei meet coincidentally, and eventually become good friends, so good as to treat one another as brothers. Eventually, they become engaged in the Yellow Turban rebellion, which would be their first military achievement. Initially their efforts are not appreciated, they do not receive offices, though later they do obtain these through various means.

2.1 Records of the Three Kingdoms

Naturally, the Guan Yu zhuan 關雲傳 ‘Records on Guan Yu’ provide the most detailed account of his introduction. It is mentioned that he was a native of Xiezhou 解州, but fled to Zhuojun 涪州. A reason for his flight is not provided. After this, it is mentioned that while Liu Bei was mustering soldiers there, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei acted as his personal guards. After Liu Bei had received the post of administrator (xiang 相) in Pingyuan 平遠, he appointed Guan Yu and Zhang Fei as Defenders-in-chief (Sima 司馬). Lastly, it is mentioned that Liu Bei treated the two as brothers, stating also that when reclining, they would share the same couch. However, no mention of any specific oath of brotherhood is made.¹⁷ In the Xianzhu zhuan 先主傳 ‘Records on the First Ruler’, i.e. the records on Liu Bei, no specific introduction is given for either Guan Yu or Zhang Fei. These two are only mentioned later in his records, but they are never properly introduced. The Zhang Fei zhuan 張飛傳 ‘Records on Zhang Fei’ are also very brief on this subject, mentioning merely that Fei was a native of Zhuojun and had come to serve Liu Bei together with Guan Yu at a young age. It is noted that Guan Yu was several years older than Zhang Fei, and that Zhang Fei treated him with the etiquette fitting an elder brother. Again, no mention of an oath of brotherhood is made.¹⁸

2.2 Records of the Three Kingdoms in Plain Language

After a general introduction to the Three Kingdoms, the *Plain Language* start out by introducing Guan Yu, saying that he hailed from Jieliang 涪州, but had fled from there after slaying a corrupted magistrate in righteous fury, passing by the house of Zhuojun nobleman Zhang Fei, who, impressed by his appearance, invites him into an inn for a drink. Before long, Liu Bei, on his way back from the market, where he sold sandals, enters and is invited to join

17 Chen (1959), p. 939

18 Chen (1959), p. 943

them for a drink. They get on very well, and eventually leave the inn for Zhang Fei's residence, where they swear an oath of brotherhood in the peach garden in Zhang Fei's back yard. Afterwards, they contemplate the bad state of the country, and Zhang Fei proposes to appeal to the king of Yan for permission to muster a small force with which to hold off rebels. After raising this money by means of Zhang Fei's family fortune, they end up enlisting under Huangfu Song 皇甫嵩, in order to help beat back the Yellow Turban rebellion,¹⁹ after which, through much hassle, Liu Bei manages to gain an official title of assistant-magistrate of Pingyuan.²⁰

2.3 Plays on the Three Kingdoms

The most well-known play on this episode *Liu, Guan and Zhang: the tripartite oath of brotherhood in the peach orchard* 桃园三结义, was written by an unknown source, and, although the version preserved until today is dated to the Ming, is often assumed to have been originally written during the Yuan. The plot is more or less similar to that of the *Plain Language*. After a lengthy description of Guan Yu's assassination of the magistrate of his home county of Puzhou, Zhang Fei is introduced, in this version as a butcher. In search of worthy people, he lays out a test of strength in his butcher-shop, which Guan Yu passes while Zhang Fei is out. Zhang Fei then goes to visit Guan Yu at the local inn, and the two of them decide to become sworn brothers. In the next act, Liu Bei enters and joins them. After Liu Bei falls into a drunken sleep, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei are shown an omen which indicates that Liu Bei will be a man of greatness, and so they decide to swear brotherhood together. After they have done this, Huangfu Song enters with the specific intent to recruit the apparently already well-known heroes of the Zhuo

19 Unknown (1959), pp. 10-20

20 Unknown (1959), p. 25

commandery, Liu Guan and Zhang, to the cause of the resistance against the Yellow Turban rebellion.²¹

2.4 Romance of the Three Kingdoms

After the introduction of the Yellow Turban rebellion, it is said that the imperial protector of Youzhou, which was under direct assault from them, spread notices around in the hopes of raising a volunteer army. These notices spread to Zhuojun, where Liu Bei lived. Liu Bei stumbled across it and stood looking at it sighing. His sighs attract the attention of a passer-by, which happened to be Zhang Fei. He says that he owns a farm, a butchery and a wine shop, and also harbors the desire to destroy these rebels. He and Liu Bei enter an inn to talk the matter over. While they are drinking a third man enters, who mentions to the barkeep that he is on his way to apply for the volunteer army. This intrigues the two newly met friends, and Liu Bei strikes up a conversation with him, learning that he is Guan Yu from Jieliang, and is a fugitive from his hometown because he slew a local nobleman who abused his power. The three decide to retire to Zhang Fei's farm, where they swear an oath of brotherhood and pledge to preserve the state. After they sign up for the army, they establish great victories against the Yellow Turban rebels, but are initially poorly rewarded.²² Eventually, through much toil and the beating up of a government official by Zhang Fei, Liu Bei attains the magistracy of Pingyuan.²³

It appears that this episode has undergone significant shifts of focus over the years, with more and more emphasis being put onto the brotherhood between Liu, Guan and Zhang. In addition, some of the credit for the battles against the Yellow Turbans and the attaining of the

21 Idema & West (2012), pp.5-39; Unknown (Ming) in Wang (1977), No. 65 “□□□□”

22 Luo (1979), pp. 3-9

23 Luo (1979), pp. 11-17

post in Pingyuan has been given to Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, rather than to Liu Bei himself. Lastly, Guan Yu's backstory in Xiezhou has received more detail.

3. Guan Yu's service under Cao Cao

Another key episode to the Three Kingdoms and mainly to the image of Guan Yu is the brief period he spent in Cao Cao's service. As Liu Bei starts to become a threat to Cao Cao, he is driven from Xuzhou 徐州 by the latter's armies. Guan Yu was captured, but his life spared, as Cao Cao greatly appreciated Guan Yu's prowess in battle. Guan Yu is taken back to capital Xuchang 许昌 and treated very liberally by Cao Cao. However, thoughts of returning to his brother's side never disappear and eventually, after repaying Cao Cao for his kindness by decapitating Yan Liang 颜良, a top general of Yuan Shao 袁绍, one of Cao Cao's greatest rivals at that time, Guan Yu leaves his side and rejoins Liu Bei at Gucheng 古城. This episode, which was historically already present, has been heavily romanticized in the novelized versions of the Three Kingdoms story, and become another central point in defining Guan Yu's *zhongyi*, here consisting of on the one hand his gratitude towards Cao Cao for sparing his life and treating him well, and on the other his loyalty to Liu Bei and determination to return to his side whenever possible.

3.1 Records of the Three Kingdoms

As is to be expected, the Records on Guan Yu are most elaborate on this episode. Liu Bei had managed to seize Xuzhou by slaying the magistrate Che Zhou 车周. After Cao Cao led a punitive expedition eastwards, Liu Bei fled towards Yuan Shao, while Guan Yu was made prisoner and led back to capital Xuchang. Cao Cao promoted Guan Yu to Outstanding General (Pian Jiangjun 偏将军) and treated him very well. When Yuan Shao sent his top general Yan Liang

out to siege the strategic location of Baima 白馬, Guan Yu was sent together with Zhang Liao 張遼 to fight him. Guan Yu rode into the camp, beheaded Yan Liang and rode out again in the midst of ten thousand soldiers, none of which could stand against him, and lifted the siege of Baima. After this he was promoted by Cao Cao to Marquis of *Hanshouting* (*Hanshouting Hou* 漢壽亭侯). Cao Cao had long had a hunch that Guan Yu had no intention of staying with him for long, so he sent Zhang Liao to investigate the matter with him. Guan Yu tells him that, while, admittedly, Cao Cao has treated him most liberally, he cannot turn his back on Liu Bei, with whom he has apparently sworn to die together. This last notion I find very interesting, as no mention was made of an oath between Guan Yu and Liu Bei before. However, he pledges to repay Cao Cao's kindness before leaving. Cao Cao found him very honorable, and, when Guan Yu had decapitated Yan Liang, Cao Cao knew he would be leaving. He gave him loads of gifts, which Guan Yu all left behind, and he took his leave by means of a letter. When he had gone, Cao Cao forbade his generals to pursue him, saying that everyone has his ruler to serve,²⁴ a saying which will return in later versions, presumably to express Cao Cao's sense of honour.

Other records mention this episode only briefly. The *Wudi ji* 魏紀 'Chronicles on the Martial Emperor', i.e. the records on Cao Cao, mention only that Liu Bei left Guan Yu in charge of the defense of Xiapi 許都, who surrendered to Cao Cao. Cao Cao then employed him to kill Yan Liang, and, it is said, then defeated Yuan Shao's other chief general Wen Chou 文醜 by himself, without mention of Guan Yu. After this Guan Yu returned to Liu Bei's side.²⁵ The *Records on the First Ruler* are similarly brief: After Liu Bei was driven from Xuzhou, Guan Yu was captured, but returned to him after Liu Bei had fled to Yuan Shao. No mention is made of the siege of Baima or the beheading of Yan Liang. Liu Bei then uses a ruse to leave Shao's side,

24 Chen (1959), pp. 939-940

25 Chen (1959), pp. 18-19

and is then intercepted by Cao Cao's general Cai Yang 蔡瑁, but he was disposed of quickly by Liu Bei himself.²⁶

3.2 *Records of the Three Kingdoms in Plain Language*

In the *Pain Language*, Liu Bei is included in a plot to murder Cao Cao, and when this plot is discovered Cao Cao starts to get suspicious of Liu Bei and sends him off to Xuzhou, where Liu Bei would meet Cao Cao's retainer Che Zhou, of whom Guan Yu disposes quickly. Che Zhou's death gives Cao Cao a reason to attack Liu Bei. When his armies arrives, Liu Bei plans to immediately raid his camp so as to take advantage of Cao Cao's long journey, but his plan is told to Cao Cao, who counters it. Liu Bei is forced to flee, and Cao Cao occupies Xuzhou and immediately sends Zhang Liao to Xiaopei 小沛, where Guan Yu is stationed to guard Liu Bei's wives and child, to talk him over. Guan Yu makes three conditions under which he will yield to Cao Cao, namely that he and Liu Bei's wives will share a residence, divided in two quarters, that as soon as he should learn of Liu Bei's whereabouts, he should be allowed to leave, and lastly that he will surrender to the Han court, rather than to Cao Cao. Cao Cao accepts his conditions and promotes him to Marquis of Shouting, as, Hong (1995)²⁷ says, the title Marquis of Hanshouting is often misinterpreted. Meanwhile Liu Bei takes refuge with Cao Cao's rival Yuan Shao, and advises him to attack Cao Cao. Yuan Shao sends out an army led by Yan Liang, who defeats numerous of Cao Cao's generals in order. Cao Cao invites Guan Yu over and tells him of the situation. Guan Yu then makes short work of Yan Liang. When news of his death is reported to Yuan Shao, his other top general Wen Chou offers to take revenge on Guan Yu, but he is disposed of in a similar manner. This mightily angers Yuan Shao, who would have Liu Bei killed,

²⁶ Chen (1959), pp. 875-876

²⁷ Hong (1995), p. 60

had not Zhao Yuan guaranteed Yuan Shao of Liu Bei's innocence with the lives of his family. Thereupon Liu Bei and Zhao Yun flee towards Liu Biao under a false pretense.²⁸

Meanwhile Guan Yu has heard news that Liu Bei was with Yuan Shao, and prepares to leave, but he is prevented from seeing Cao Cao, who keeps his quarters closed for three days straight. Angered, Guan Yu leaves behind all wealth he received from Cao Cao and leaves. When Cao Cao hears of this he is very angry and sets off to chase him down. From Zhang Liao he obtains a plan to capture Guan Yu, by tempting him into dismounting from his horse with the gift of a robe and jumping him. However, Guan Yu never leaves his horse, instead lifting up the robe with the tip of his blade. He then arrives at Yuan Shao's court, but does not find Liu Bei there and leaves again for Liu Biao. At the same time, Liu Bei has found Zhang Fei in Gucheng. When Guan Yu arrives there too, Zhang Fei prepares to fight him, thinking his allegiance lies with Cao Cao. However, soon an army led by Cai Yang arrives, sent by Cao Cao to bring Guan Yu back. Guan Yu kills Cai Yang to prove his allegiance to Liu Bei, upon which the three sworn brothers properly reunite.²⁹

3.3 Plays on the Three Kingdoms

The best known plays on this episodes are the following two: Zhu Youdun's *Guan Yunchang's Righteous and Brave Refusal of Gold* 關雲長拒金 and *Guan Yunchang's lone 1000-li march* 關雲長單騎千里行, authored by an unknown source. The former starts with Zhang Liao recounting the events of Cao Cao recruiting Guan Yu, then going to his residence in order to

28 Unknown (1959), pp. 49-57

29 Unknown (1959), pp. 57-62

provide him with presents, which Guan Yu reluctantly accepts. What follows is Guan Yu's battle against Yan Liang, and a messenger reporting the battle to Cao Cao, with much praise of Guan Yu's prowess. It ends with Guan Yu taking his leave of Cao Cao, and Zhang Liao and Xiahou Dun's pursuit of him, in order to provide him with even more presents. Xiahou Dun also tries to assassinate Guan Yu in the process, but fails horribly.³⁰

The *lone 1000-li march* starts with a lengthy introduction, consisting of the events preceding Guan Yu's surrender to Cao Cao, with Zhang Fei's plan of raiding Cao Cao's camp being relayed to Cao Cao by an officer named Zhang Hu. Next comes Cao Cao's siege of Xiapi and his recruitment of Guan Yu under the three conditions mentioned in paragraph 3.2. Next we are shown that Zhang Fei and Liu Bei have reunited and wrested control of Gucheng from Zhang Hu, who had been stationed there. At the same time Zhang Liao recounts Guan Yu's culling of Yan Liang to the audience, and invites him to a banquet, where Zhang Hu arrives to tell Cao Cao that Liu Bei and Zhang Fei have taken Gucheng. Guan Yu overhears this, and, knowing where his brothers are, prepares his departure from Cao Cao. The last two acts deal firstly with Zhang Liao offering three plans to Cao Cao to recapture Guan Yu, similar to the plan displayed in the *Plain Language*. However, the plans do not succeed, and the final act deals with Guan Yu's arrival at Gucheng, his slaying of Cai Yang, and the brothers' reunion.³¹

3.4 *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

The build-up to this episode differs only slightly from that of the *Plain Language*. In the *Romance*, Guan Yu has already seized control of Xuzhou for Liu Bei by slaying Che Zhou,³² after which Cao Cao discovers the plot being made against him, which Liu Bei also backed, and

30 Zhu (1979) in Idema & West (2012), pp. 113-151;

31 Unknown (Yuan) in Wang (1977), no. 27 “□□□□”

32 Luo (1979), pp. 192-193

takes this opportunity to attack Liu Bei in Xuzhou. Liu Bei tries to raid his camp as soon as he arrives, but this time it is an omen in the form of a sudden gust of wind that informs Cao Cao, who then makes preparations against the raid. After this, Liu Bei seeks refuge with Yuan Shao, and Cao Cao occupies Xuzhou, then heads for Xiapi, where Guan Yu was stationed to protect Liu Bei's wives. Cao Cao deliberates with his officers on the possibility of getting Guan Yu to come over to him, when Zhang Liao, who says he is an old friend of Guan Yu, offers to talk to him. Guan Yu is challenged to fight, and then forced up a mountain, which is surrounded, while Cao Cao occupies Xiapi. Then Zhang Liao is sent in to talk to Guan Yu, who makes three conditions for his surrender: Firstly he will surrender to the Han, and not to Cao Cao, secondly, he demands for the salary befitting an Imperial Uncle (Huangshu 皇叔), which was Liu Bei's title, to be provided to his two sisters-in-law, and lastly, that whenever he should hear of Liu Bei's whereabouts, he is to be allowed to leave. Cao Cao agrees, albeit reluctantly to the third condition. After requesting some space to enter Xiapi and discuss the matter with Liu Bei's wives, Guan Yu heads back to Xuchang with Cao Cao's army. Along the way Cao Cao decides to test Guan Yu's sense of propriety, and purposely mixes up the orders, causing Guan Yu to be assigned the same chamber as his sisters-in-law, to which Guan Yu responds by standing outside of it through the night, holding a candle, without showing the slightest hint of fatigue. This impresses Cao Cao mightily.³³

After returning to Xuchang, Cao Cao assigns Guan Yu a residence, which Guan Yu then divides in two parts. Cao Cao showers Guan Yu with gifts of wealth and beautiful serving maids, all of which Guan Yu stores in the two ladies' quarters. Lastly, Cao Cao presents him with the thousand-mile-a-day horse Red Hare that Lü Bu once rode, for which Guan Yu thanks him abundantly, saying that this horse will allow him to return to Liu Bei's side within a matter of

³³ Luo (1979), pp. 214-222

days. By now Cao Cao realizes that it can't be helped that Guan Yu will eventually leave his side, and tries to deny Guan Yu the chance to repay him for his kindness, which he knows Guan Yu plans on doing before he leaves. However, he would not be able to keep this up, since when Yuan Shao, advised by Liu Bei, attacks Cao Cao at Baima, Cao Cao is forced to play his trump card in the form of Guan Yu, who beheads top general Yan Liang amidst ten thousand warriors.³⁴ A commentary on the original 240-chapter version explains that Liu Bei had previously told Yuan Shao about his brother Guan Yu, who would certainly be in Cao Cao's camp. If Shao's army should see him, he should be called over, and he would certainly join them. Therefore, when Yan Liang saw Guan Yu coming towards him, he was caught unprepared as he thought Guan Yu was coming over to his side.³⁵ In the 120-chapter version this has not been recorded. When Shao's other chief general Wen Chou sets out to avenge Yan Liang, Guan Yu slays him as well.

Liu Bei flees from the outraged Yuan Shao, and sends a secret messenger to Guan Yu, who then, unable to visit Cao Cao in time, leaves him a written note and leaves. Cao Cao follows him to present him with another robe and compensation for his traveling expenses, but Guan Yu only accepts the former, lifting up the robe with his blade for fear of a ruse. Cao Cao then forbids his generals to pursue Guan Yu, saying that each soldier has his lord to serve. On his way to see Liu Bei, Guan Yu is obstructed five times, and each time he is asked to present a written permission to pass from Cao Cao. Pressed hard for time, Guan Yu slays six generals through these five encounters, for all of which Cao Cao eventually pardons him as well. On the way he receives word that Liu Bei has left Yuan Shao and is headed in another direction, while on the way he recruits the former Yellow Turban rebel Zhou Cang 周倉. By the time Guan Yu arrives at Gucheng, where he finds Zhang Fei, he discovers he has been followed by Cai Yang, who set out

34 Luo (1979), pp. 222-226

35 Luo (1980), pp. 247-248

on his own initiative to take him back. Guan Yu then slays Cai Yang to prove his dedication to the oath of brotherhood to the initially outraged Zhang Fei. Word is sent to Liu Bei, who had once more returned to Yuan Shao's side. He makes for Gucheng as well and the three brothers happily reunite.³⁶

Since this is one of the key episodes in defining Guan Yu's righteous spirit, it has received significant overhauls throughout the different versions. In the *Romance*, more moments have been highlighted where Guan Yu's *zhongyi* could really shine through. Additionally, Cao Cao has received a notable change of position, as in both the *Records* and the *Romance* he displays a deep respect for Guan Yu's *zhongyi* by prohibiting his officers from pursuing Guan Yu, while in the *Plain Language* he does not only pursue him in person with a plot to recapture him, but even after this plan has failed he sends Cai Yang after Guan Yu to recapture him. Certainly this indicates that Cao Cao's character was heavily disputed during the time the *Plain Language* was written. In the plays it is interesting is that the Yuan dynasty *thousand-li march* play doesn't explicitly show Guan Yu's fight against Yan Liang, whereas the Ming dynasty *refusal of gold* does. This seems to indicate a change of attitude on which I will elaborate later.

4. Pursuits against Lü Bu and Guan Yu at the Single-sword meeting

Though chronologically rather far apart, these two episodes have been combined into one chapter, since neither is very lengthy, but both are in some or all versions of the story worth mentioning when discussing the image of Guan Yu in the story. Lü Bu was considered the strongest man of his time, and through a bribe takes the side of the rebel warlord Dong Zhuo, under whose service he allegedly puts up a phenomenal fight against the combined efforts of Liu

³⁶ Luo (1979), pp. 227-252

Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei at a place called Tigercage Pass (*Hulaoguan* 虎牢關). After murdering Dong Zhuo, he temporarily becomes somewhat of an ally to Liu Bei, but they are eventually driven apart, and Liu Bei takes the field against him alongside Cao Cao at Xiapi. Though historically the three brothers did not have much significant interaction with Lü Bu, episodes involving him have also been heavily romanticized in the later versions of the story, and just might be quite relevant to the development of Guan Yu's character as well.

Lu Su's so-called single-sword meeting takes place at a far later stage, when Liu Bei has already conquered the lands of Yizhou 益州 and settled the kingdom of Shu. By this time Sun Quan starts reminding them of the lands of Jingzhou, which had been lent to him by Sun Quan before, when Liu Bei did not yet have a land to call his own. Since they had conquered Yizhou now, it would only seem logical that the lands of Jingzhou are returned to Wu. Sun Quan sends his advisor Lu Su to Jingzhou to wrest control of these lands, where he has to face Guan Yu, who is sent to guard Jingzhou. This episode has seen a serious shift of focus throughout the development of the Three Kingdoms story, and is definitely worth examining as well.

4.1 Records of the Three Kingdoms

Most episodes that include Lü Bu in the Records of the First Ruler and the Chronicles on the Martial Emperor are dealt with in a few words, and Guan Yu is not mentioned in relation to him. In the Records on Guan Yu, the commentary mentions him briefly in the joint attack by Cao Cao and Liu Bei on Lü Bu in Xiapi, saying that he requested from Cao Cao the hand of the wife of a servant of Lü Bu's by the family name of Qin 秦, a request which Cao Cao had originally granted. However, after seeing her for himself, Cao Cao went back on his word, mightily disgruntling Guan Yu.³⁷ The fabled battle against Dong Zhuo, in which Liu Bei, Guan Yu and

³⁷ Chen (1959), p. 939

Zhang Fei fight Lü Bu at the Tiger Cage Pass is most likely non-existent, as Sun Jian 孫堅, Sun Quan's father, mainly led the charge on that battle. Liu, Guan and Zhang were most likely historically not present at that battle, as none of the records dealing with it mention any of them.

Lu Su's Single Sword meeting is not mentioned in the Records on Guan Yu, but rather in the Lu Su zhuan 呂孫傳 'Records on Lu Su'. It is said that after Liu Bei had subdued Yizhou, Sun Quan, the King of Wu, sent Lu Su to ask him for three counties within Jingzhou. Liu Bei refuses, and sends Guan Yu to guard them. Lu Su then invites Guan Yu to a banquet, on the conditions that both sides leave their soldiers outside of the camp, and come armed with only one sword. Guan Yu agrees, and Lu Su makes Wu's case to him, to which an unnamed soldier replies by disputing Wu's claim on the counties. The person is then urged to leave by both Guan Yu and Lu Su. The commentary adds an account of Guan Yu's reply to Lu Su's opening statement, and in turn Lu Su's reply to that, appealing to Liu Bei's sense of honor, and allegedly leaving Guan Yu dumbfounded.³⁸

4.2 Records of the Three Kingdoms in Plain Language

Guan Yu is not prominently featured in any campaigns against Lü Bu in the *Plain Language*. In the battle against the rebel warlord Dong Zhuo, the three brothers fight Lü Bu together in a short skirmish. After that, Zhang Fei faces Lü Bu alone and defeats him.³⁹ After Dong Zhuo has been murdered by Lü Bu, the latter takes refuge with Liu Bei, who obtained the county of Xuzhou. While Liu Bei is away, Zhang Fei messes up and loses Xuzhou to Lü Bu, after which Liu Bei is forced to take refuge in the neighboring Xiaopei. From here Zhang Fei calls for reinforcements from Cao Cao, and with his help Liu Bei regains Xuzhou and forces Lü

³⁸ Chen (1959), p. 1272

³⁹ Unknown (1959), pp. 32-33

Bu to flee to Xiapi, where Cao Cao continues to besiege him. Eventually one of Lü Bu's retainers steals his fabled horse Red Hare and goes over to Cao Cao. Guan Yu intercepts him and takes the horse. After this Lü Bu is captured by Zhang Fei and Liu Bei urges Cao Cao to behead him.⁴⁰

In the *Plain Language*, the story of Guan Yu's bone-scraping surgery, usually associated with his death (see below), is told before the Single Sword meeting, mentioning that he had been injured by a poisoned arrow fired by a Han Fu 韓福 of Wu, who is otherwise unknown. It is also said that it was the famous physician Hua Tuo 華佗 who administered the bone-scraping surgery to cure him of the poison. Guan Yu rejected Hua Tuo's proposal of fastening Guan Yu's arm to an iron ring in order for him to do his surgery, and instead had him do it while Guan Yu was merrily drinking and chatting to his fellow officers.⁴¹ The events in the subsequent Single Sword meeting are reduced significantly. All that is said is that music is played, upon which complaints rise up that the tone Yu 羽 did not sound, which is taken by Guan Yu as a pun meaning "Yu does not understand". He is enraged and threatens Lu Su, upon which he leaves. The return of the three counties of Jingzhou is not mentioned.⁴²

4.3 Plays on the Three Kingdoms

There is a very extensive play on the three brothers' battle against Lü Bu. It was written by Zheng Guangzu 鄭光祖, one of the most well-known *zaju* playwrights during the Yuan, and is known as *At tigerscage pass, the three fight Lü Bu* 關公斬呂布. The version preserved to this day is a Ming reproduction. It sports two very extensive intros outlining the events leading up to the battle: Dong Zhuo has wrested control of the capital and Yuan Shao has gathered a coalition to

40 Unknown (1959), pp. 36-45

41 Unknown (1959), p. 116

42 Unknown (1959), p. 117

stop him. Sun Jian is originally their most valuable asset, but the coalition is entirely incapable of overcoming Lü Bu. Cao Cao proposes to send word to Pingyuan, where, on one of his expeditions, he had met the three brothers Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, who, he is sure, can overcome Lü Bu. After they arrive, Zhang Fei angers Sun Jian, who starts to despise the trio. When Sun Jian is once more called upon to fight Lü Bu, he feigns a stomach ache, an act of cowardice for which Zhang Fei berates him. At this point Sun Jian seeks to kill Zhang Fei, but Cao Cao manages to keep the two apart in order to prevent this. Zhang Fei is then ordered to fight Lü Bu, and his brothers follow him into battle. They emerge victorious, and all three are awarded titles, as well as Cao Cao for bringing them in.⁴³ Another play exists, called *Zhang Yide fights Lü Bu alone* 關雲長單挑呂布, in which, after the three have driven Lü Bu back, Zhang Fei engages in a wager with Sun Jian to defeat Lü Bu one on one, similar to the corresponding episode in the *Plain Language*.⁴⁴

The Single Sword Meeting is most famously relayed by Guan Hanqing in his play *The great king Guan goes alone to the Single Sword Meeting* 關雲長單刀赴會, and of it both a Yuan and a Ming version have been collected, although of the former significantly less than the latter. In the first two acts, Lu Su discusses his plot with an elderly citizen of Wu, and a Daoist master, both of whom know Guan Yu, and tell Lu Su that his plan will most likely not succeed. The third act deals with his messenger delivering the invitation to Guan Yu, and Guan Yu developing a contingency plan with his son, Guan Ping 關平. In the last act the meeting plays out, quite similar to as displayed in the *Records* and the *Plain Language*. The ambush fails and Guan Ping escorts his father back to Jingzhou.⁴⁵ The way this play is constructed is very representative of plays on

43 Zheng (Yuan) in Wang (1977), no. 19 “關雲長”

44 Unknown (Ming(2)) in Wang (1977), no. 68 “關雲長”

45 Idema & West (2012), pp. 246-295; Guan (Ming) in Wang (1977), no. 3 “關雲長”

Guan Yu, as most of his prowess is being discussed by other characters, and very little of it is displayed directly on stage, as was seen before in the *thousand-li march*.

4.4 *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

The episodes featuring Lü Bu in the *Romance* are much like those in the *Plain Language*. A coalition assembles to take down the rebel warlord Dong Zhuo, who has wrested control of the capital for himself, and Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei also join it under Gongsun Zan 公孫贊, one of the assembled lords and a friend of Liu Bei's. Guan Yu is the first to make his mark on the battlefield, volunteering to ride out and slay one of Dong Zhuo's chief generals Hua Xiong 華雄, who has until then proved a nuisance. This display of confidence greatly angers some of the gathered lords because of Guan Yu's low rank, but Cao Cao decides to give him a chance and Guan Yu returns shortly after with Hua Xiong's head. After that Dong Zhuo sends out Lü Bu, and in a joint battle the three brothers manage to defeat him.⁴⁶ Later, in a manner similar to that described in the *Plain Language*, Lü Bu takes Xuzhou from Liu Bei, upon which Liu Bei and Cao Cao mount an attack against him. Guan Yu does not feature specifically in this episode. Lü Bu is betrayed by one of his retainers and flees to Xiapi, where a flood attack distresses his officers so much that they betray him as well. They steal his horse, Red Hare, which they give to Cao Cao, and present Lü Bu to Cao Cao, who beheads him on Liu Bei's advice. He also plans to behead Zhang Liao, but is withheld from that by Guan Yu, who has seen Zhang Liao numerous times during this assault, and had long recognized him as being an honorable man. Instead, Zhang Liao is admitted into Cao Cao's ranks.⁴⁷

46 Luo (1979), pp. 39-47

47 Luo (1979), pp. 166-177

The Single Sword meeting has been swung quite significantly in Guan Yu's favor. When Guan Yu receives the invitation from Lu Su, he expects a plot and has his son Guan Ping patrol the nearby waters with a small force in order to come to his aid as needed. When Lu Su brings up the returning of the three counties in Jingzhou, Guan Yu constantly dismisses the subject, saying that matters of politics are not to be talked of during a meal. When Lu Su presses on, it is Guan Yu's officer Zhou Cang who loses his patience and disputes Wu's claim on the lands. Guan Yu then flies into a rage, has Zhou Cang signal Guan Ping to come ashore, and takes Lu Su hostage until he is safely back in the boat, and then returns to Jingzhou.⁴⁸

These two episodes, while only briefly glossed over in the *Records*, have both found a new use in the *Plain Language* and the *Romance*, and had their focus changed accordingly. Guan Yu and Zhang Fei both received significantly more attention in the pursuits against Lü Bu, to the detriment of Sun Jian, who, especially in the plays, had been dealt a stinging defeat in the battle against Dong Zhuo to allow the three brothers their moment of glory. The Single Sword meeting, originally a significant triumph on the part of Lu Su, has been overhauled completely and, in the *Romance*, has become just another moment of glory to Guan Yu. This is a clear sign that Guan Yu was gaining popular respect.

5. Guan Yu's death in Jingzhou

Lastly, the circumstances surrounding Guan Yu's death are, needless to say, also key to his image. As Guan Yu is guarding Jingzhou, his pride gets the better of him, and he goes on the offensive towards Cao Cao. By this time Guan Yu's prowess is known throughout the land, and Cao Cao is considering moving the capital just to avoid him. However, he manages to join forces

⁴⁸ Luo (1979), pp. 569-573

with Wu and leads a joint counterattack on Guan Yu, which leads to Guan Yu's capture and execution. His death is displayed increasingly mystical as one progresses through the different versions, and by the *Romance* his spirit even returns several times to take revenge.

5.1 Records of the Three Kingdoms

The Records of Guan Yu on his post in Jingzhou are rather chaotic, mentioning several events, such as Guan Yu's challenge to Ma Chao, which was cleverly handled by a reply letter from Zhuge Liang, and the poisoned arrow wound in his left arm, which was treated by a bone-scraping surgery while Guan Yu was eating and chatting with his fellow officers. After he received his title of Front General from Liu Bei, he attacks Cao Ren 曹仁 in Fancheng 樊城, upon which Cao Cao sends Pang De 庞德 and Yu Jin 于禁 to fend him off, however, Pang De is slain by Guan Yu, and Yu Jin surrenders. Cao Cao is then getting so worried that he considers moving the capital in order to avoid Guan Yu. Eventually he sends for help from Sun Quan, who initially is not tending to agree, but after Guan Yu angrily refuses a marriage proposal from Sun Quan, the latter is appalled by Guan Yu's vanity and sends Lü Meng 吕蒙 to attack him with disguised troops. Winning the disgruntled officers Mi Fang 糜芳 and Fu Shiren 傅士仁 over to his side, Lü Meng takes Guan Yu's main camp, while Cao Cao sends Xu Huang 许都 to assist him. Guan Yu is beaten back and, together with his son Guan Ping, captured by Sun Quan, who initially wants to employ him, but is persuaded not to, and has him executed instead.⁴⁹

The Chronicles of the Martial Emperor tell more or less the same story, but less credit is given to Guan Yu for defeating Yu Jin, and all the more to Xu Huang, who is said to have ultimately defeated Guan Yu.⁵⁰ The Records of the First Ruler barely mention this episode,

49 Chen (1959), pp. 940-942

50 Chen (1959), pp. 51-53

simply saying that Guan Yu had fallen prey to a surprise attack by Sun Quan and had been killed.⁵¹ The Lü Meng zhuan 呂蒙傳 ‘Records on Lü Meng’ give a more detailed account of his attack on Guan Yu, saying that he heard that Guan Yu had made preparations against an attack by Wu, but faked an illness, causing Guan Yu to call more troops to the assault on Fancheng, whereupon Lü Meng disguised his army as merchants and sneaked into Jingzhou without Guan Yu’s knowing. He wins over Fu Shiren and Mi Fang, who were dissatisfied with Guan Yu’s punishment of them for negligence during the watch. By the time Guan Yu returned, his army had lost the will to fight as a result of Lü Meng’s honorable approach to the inhabitants of the captured cities. He flees towards Maicheng 麥城, but is cut off by two other Wu officers.⁵²

5.2 Records of the Three Kingdoms in Plain Language

The *Plain Language* is surprisingly brief on this episode: when Liu Bei is hesitating who to nominate as his successor, Guan Yu advises him to choose his biological son Liu Chan 劉禪 over his adopted son Liu Feng 劉禪. This leaves Liu Feng angry with Guan Yu. Shortly after, Guan Yu receives a visitor by the name of Chen Deng 陳登, an old friend of Liu Bei’s, who has fled from Cao Cao. Cao Cao sends Pang De and Yu Jin to get him back, both of whom Guan Yu defeats. Zhang Liao then advises Cao Cao to send for help from Wu. Guan Yu hears of this, and his son Guan Ping proposes to ask Liu Bei for reinforcement, but, blinded by his desire to make a huge accomplishment, Guan Yu refuses. During the battle his old arrow wound reopens and he does thrice send for help, but all of his messages are intercepted by Liu Feng. He is surrounded and flees up a mountain, after which a storm rises up and he is said to have ascended into the Heavens.⁵³

51 Chen (1959), p. 887

52 Chen (1959), pp. 1278-1279

53 Unknown (1959), pp. 122-124

5.3 Plays on the Three Kingdoms

The presence of Guan Yu's death in the Three Kingdoms plays is as surprisingly slim as in the *Plain Language*. The only well-known play which talks about it is Guan Hanqing's *In a dream Guan and Zhang, a pair, rush to Western Shu* 關張西蜀夢相會. However, this play mostly deals with Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang's reception of the deaths of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei. The last two acts, consist firstly of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei's spirits meet each other, and lastly they both visit Liu Bei. In these two acts is mostly Zhang Fei, as the lead role, who does the speaking and singing.⁵⁴ This displays the same attitude as in the *Plain Language*, a tendency to be surprisingly brief on the topic of Guan Yu's death.

5.4 Romance of the Three Kingdoms

The episodes leading to Guan Yu's death start quite early in the *Romance*. When Liu Bei names himself king of Hanzhong 漢中, Cao Cao's advisor Sima Yi 司馬懿 offers a plan to subdue him, namely to collaborate with Wu to take Jingzhou from him, and then when Liu Bei rushes to its aid, attack him from behind as well. A messenger is sent to Wu, but Sun Quan is undecided. Zhuge Jin 諸葛瑾 advises him to propose a marriage between Sun Quan's son and Guan Yu's daughter. If Guan Yu agrees, Wu would work together with Shu to defeat Cao Cao, and if he should refuse, Wu would help Wei to attack Jingzhou. Again, this proposal enrages Guan Yu greatly. When Liu Bei hears of Cao Cao's plot, Zhuge Liang advises him to have Guan Yu attack Fancheng in order to weaken Cao Cao's foothold in the Jingzhou region. Liu Bei agrees and Guan Yu attacks Fancheng. Cao Cao then reinforces the defenders of Fancheng with an army led by Yu Jin and Pang De, which is disposed of by Guan Yu by means of a flood attack. However,

⁵⁴ Idema & West (2012), pp. 302-315; Guan (1980)

Guan Yu is hit in his left arm by an arrow fired by Pang De. The poisoned arrow which calls for Hua Tuo's surgery, however, is delivered shortly after by Cao Ren in Guan Yu's right arm. The surgery is described much like in the previous versions, and Hua Tuo is in awe of Guan Yu's display of fortitude, noting that he has never seen this before with any of his patients, and concluding that Guan Yu is 'truly godlike' (zhen tianshen 真天神).⁵⁵

After this, the defeat of Yu Jin and Pang De is reported to Cao Cao, who first considers moving the capital out of fear for Guan Yu, but then once more asks Sun Quan for help. Sun Quan this time agrees, sending Lü Meng and Lu Xun 魯孫 to attack Jingzhou. These two agree on a plan to turn Guan Yu's vanity against him. Lü Meng feigns disease and leaves Lu Xun in command. When Guan Yu hears this, he laughs at Lu Xun's low rank, and moves the greater part of his troops to help the assault of Fancheng. Lü Meng then disguises his army as merchants to sneak past Guan Yu's sentries along the river, and takes the major cities, while winning the disgruntled officers Mi Fang and Fu Shiren over to his side. When Guan Yu, inhibited by the stiches in his right arm, is beaten back by the reinforcements from Cao Cao, he finds that the cities have been taken, and his men, taken by Lü Meng's honorable treatment of the inhabitants of the city, lose the will to fight. Guan Yu's calls for help are intercepted by Liu Feng, who was angry with him for meddling in the appointment of Liu Bei's successor. Guan Yu flees to Maicheng, but the Wu forces manage to intercept him through divination, and he is captured and beheaded together with his son. Guan Yu's spirit then appears to a monk on the Yuquan 'Jade Spring' mountain 玉泉山.⁵⁶ About this last fact the 240-chapter version makes a direct reference to the Buddhist temple on said mountain. It also gives an account of the Chuandeng Lu 傳燈錄 'Records of the transmissions of the lamp', one of the core works concerning Zen Buddhism,

55 Luo (1979), pp. 629-646

56 Luo (1979), pp. 646-663

which tells of how people would worship Guan Yu. Additionally, it touches upon a myth of Guan Yu driving out the spirit of Chi You 蚩尤 from a pool dedicated to the Yellow Emperor 黄帝, on which I will elaborate later. His spirit then returns once more to kill Lü Meng and haunt Cao Cao.⁵⁷

Interestingly enough, this episode does not seem to have shifted as much as the previous three. While the events leading up to the attack by Lü Meng have received more detail and become more elaborate in the *Romance*, the bottom line and main events still seem more or less the same. Of course, the most important changes this episode has seen would be the appearances of Guan Yu after his death, which only appear in the *Romance*, where he reappears multiple times, either to seek vengeance upon his enemies, or to help his loved ones. Also, the 240-chapter version hints at some of the myths about Guan Yu that had developed by that point, which indicates that his religious presence was already quite significant by this time.

Overall, the transition of the Three Kingdoms story from the *Records*, which were very brief and to the point, to the romanticized *Romance*, displays several patterns. Firstly, the Oath of Brotherhood is something that, while only obscurely mentioned in one of the commentaries within the *Records*, is referred to in the *Romance's* version of each of the four episodes. Secondly, there is more transparency into Guan Yu's thought. He appears to be less of a soldier, following orders, and, as the story tends towards the *Romance*, the reader is given more and more glimpses into his thoughts. This allows the author to better display how Guan Yu makes his decisions based on his strong sense of justice, and thereby adds to Guan Yu's character. Lastly, it seems that as the story develops, Guan Yu is allowed an increasing number of moments of glory,

⁵⁷ Luo (1979), pp. 664-665; Luo (1980), pp. 741-742

as in the *Romance*, a lot of episodes are appearing which involve Guan Yu, even some which were in the *Plain Language* attributed to Zhang Fei, or were not present at all. In addition, some episodes in which Guan Yu was not originally triumphant have been shifted completely in his favor, notably Lu Su's Single Sword Meeting. This supports the idea that the author of the *Romance* was trying very hard to display Guan Yu as positively as they could, as sources such as Lu (1925) would argue.⁵⁸ In addition, the Three Kingdoms plays also collectively display a tendency not to directly act out Guan Yu's greatest triumphs, and to be very brief on the details of his death. This pattern might also be very interesting.

This concludes the first part of this thesis. It has become clear that Guan Yu's literary image has undergone significant changes over the different versions of the Three Kingdoms story. In the *Romance* Guan Yu is displayed strikingly differently than in the *Records*, and, as we have found out, even as the *Plain Language* was written, the plays which were circulating by that time were already ascribing a significant religious status to Guan Yu. In the second part of this thesis, this religious status will be carefully examined, which might provide some interesting clues as to how this religious status eventually came to influence and be influenced by the Three Kingdoms story.

58 Lu (1925) in Hong (1995), p. 3

II: The religious image of Guan Yu

7. Guan Yu's religious status

Guan Yu's religious status developed more or less alongside the Three Kingdoms narrative. As mentioned before, the increasing popularity of Guan Yu plays in the Yuan is undoubtedly connected to this religious status. However, although the raising of historical heroes to the status of *zhanshen* 战神 'god of war' has been seen before, none of them seem to have attained the scale of deification which Guan Yu came to enjoy. For this reason, it could be very helpful to look at how this process played out. I have consulted multiple scholarly works on this process in order to arrive at a clear overview of the development of Guan Yu's religious status, which I briefly lay out in the following paragraph. After that I will discuss the individual points of the sources which have led me to this outline in more detail, bringing them into conversation and situating my own argument within this scholarly field.

7.1 The development of Guan Yu's religious status

Throughout the rest of the Six Dynasties period, which would last until 589 AD, Guan Yu was shown fitting respect for someone who died for his country. This was common practice for any direct casualties of war, of which before the Yellow Emperor and his mythical adversary Chi You, as well as Jiang Taigong 姜太公, had been the most notable examples. Guan Yu was not considered anything more than a war hero, and was remembered, like his sworn brother Zhang Fei, for both his military strength and his less redeeming qualities, most notably being

strong-willed and vain. Although a shrine was set up for him in on the Yuquan Mountain, commemorating his death, there was nothing divine about his image just yet.⁵⁹

The Tang 唐 dynasty (618-907) was widely considered a time of peace and prosperity in Chinese history.⁶⁰ As a result, military achievements were being looked down upon, under the control of civil officials, virtually all military heroes were heavily criticized, receding mostly to the martial or *wu* 武 temples dedicated to Jiang Taigong, who was at this point considered the main *zhanshen*. Likewise, reverence for Guan Yu went into hibernation and was restricted to the small shrine on Yuquan Mountain, which had been built during the Western Jin. Cao Cao, and Zhuge Liang in particular, as one of the most pronounced civil or *wen* 文 heroes of the Three Kingdoms,⁶¹ were considered the only true heroes of this time period. However, Guan Yu's Yuquan mountain shrine did develop strong ties with the Buddhist temple on the same mountain during this time, which was enduring similar assaults from the Daoists and Neo-Confucians. It is from this temples that the first myth around Guan Yu developed.⁶²

The situation described above more or less continued during most of the Northern Song (960-1127). After the invasion by the Jürchen, during which the northern part of China was occupied by the Jin 金, not to be confused with the Western Jin 西晋, forcing the Song to the south and ushering in the period known as the Southern Song. This served as a harsh reminder to the Song that their military was not all that overwhelming, and being driven from their land by barbarians led to calls for righteousness and a hero. With this, the general attitude towards the

59 For a more detailed account of Guan Yu's status during the Six dynasties period, see Huang (1968), pp. 90-91; 156-162, Li (2011) pp. 484-485 and Yan (2006), pp. 77-85

60 For a closer assessment and discussion of the Tang as a time of prosperity, see Ter Haar (2009), pp. 143-162

61 The subject of *wen* and *wu* in relation to Three Kingdoms heroes is one worthy of its own study. For a closer assessment of this, see Huang (2006)

62 For a more detailed account of Guan Yu's status during the Tang, see Huang (1968), pp. 162-164, Yan (2006), pp. 86-93; 151-157 and Duara (1988), pp.781

Three Kingdoms story also shifted, partly due to the proliferation of the profession of storytelling, *shuohua* 说话 or *jiangshi* 讲史, and people in both the Southern Song and the occupied Jin started to identify with the Shu kingdom, which was also often driven from its land by Cao Cao. In addition, a new myth arose during this time of Guan Yu protecting a Daoist temple from the spirit of Chi You, the Yellow Emperor's mythical opponent. This served to extend Guan Yu's protection from the Buddhists to the Daoists and the imperial court. Slowly, people were starting to look up to Guan Yu as a hero and a bringer of righteousness, the demand for which was enormous over this time period.⁶³

When the Mongols invaded the Jin and later the Southern Song and established the Yuan dynasty, Guan Yu's status remained more or less untouched, as the Mongols, the Jürchen and the Han Chinese at this point all had a certain reverence for Guan Yu. As the empire was now ruled by the Mongols, the strong borders between the official and rural areas started to fade, allowing for temples to Guan Yu to also appear in larger cities, from which they had been barred by the Confucian elite before. Much writing was done on Guan Yu during this time, ranging from the *Guangong Zhuanshu* 三国志 'Particular books on Guan Yu', which were mostly aimed at spreading faith in Guan Yu as a deity, to the *Records of the Three Kingdoms in Plain Language* and the *zaju* plays discussed earlier in this thesis. In all of these, hints of Guan Yu's religious status were present, and he gained the status of being a protector of communities, and particularly merchants and travelers.⁶⁴

After the Yuan, Guan Yu worship had accumulated so much momentum that when the Han Chinese took back the empire from the Mongols and established the Ming dynasty, Guan Yu

⁶³ For a more detailed account of Guan Yu's status during the Northern and Southern Song, see Huang (1968) pp.95-97; 164-166, Yan (2006) pp. 95-112; 117-120; 158-174 and Duara (1988) p. 781

⁶⁴ For a more detailed account of Guan Yu's status during the Yuan, see Huang (1968) pp. 92-95; 97-100, Yan (2006) pp. 121-132; 175-185, and Duara (1988) pp. 781-782

had already indubitably become an actual deity. The Confucian elite went to work on canonizing Guan Yu, and, along with even more temples to him appearing, more myths about him were arising, and even some aspects of his character which went against the Confucian doctrine, such as his tendency to break the law in order to achieve his righteous goals, were replaced or supplemented with more redeeming ones, such as a strong preference in literature for *Zuo's Commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu Zuozhuan* 春秋左傳). When still later the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was released, Guan Yu was also displayed having supernatural features in the story, mainly having to do with his spirit returning to the human world, and him receiving due reverence from the other characters. This trend continued on through the Qing, by the end of which Guan Yu had officially received the title of emperor or *di* 帝, and his status eclipsed that of other deities in the same field, such as *zhanshen* Jiang Taigong and god of wealth (*caishen* 財神) Zhao Gongming 趙公明, and he had accumulated a following which ranged from the imperial court to rebels and outlaws. He was considered a god of both war and wealth, a protector of the country and its different communities, a powerful Buddhist and Daoist deity, a sage the equal of Confucius, and a paragon of virtue and righteousness.⁶⁵

7.2 Discussion

The account as given above is the way I gathered it from the sources mentioned in the footnotes. The three main sources that have contributed to this sequence of events have been Duara (1988), Yan (2006) and Huang (1968), which, in their own ways, have all been invaluable sources. Duara's article for its unique mythological approach, and the way it clearly displays the appeal of Guan Yu to different communities and population groups, the books of Yan and Huang

⁶⁵ For a more detailed account of Guan Yu's status during the Ming and Qing, see Huang (1968) pp. 100-122; 166-187, Yan (2006) pp. 133-139; 186-220, Li (2011) pp. 485-496 and Duara (1988) pp. 783-785

mostly for their ability to provide a clear chronological sequence of events, while incorporating a multitude of different sources themselves, yet still each having their own unique approach to the subject. In the passage below, I will combine this sequence of events with my own findings to arrive at a conclusion for this section.

It seems that Guan Yu's religious image developed steadily over the course of time, yet also met with surges of popularity at certain periods in history. From humble beginnings on the Yuquan Mountain, where, Yan tells us, the first myths revolving around Guan Yu originate from,⁶⁶ it would only be after the transition from Northern to Southern Song that his image would really surge. This seems to have been influenced by a combination of factors, including a new approach to the Three Kingdoms history of *Zun Liu fan Cao* 尊劉反曹 'Respect Liu and turn away from Cao', possibly inspired by Zhu Xi 朱熹's commentary to the historical canon *Zizhi Tongjian* 資治通鑑 'Comprehensive mirror in aid of governance'.⁶⁷ Combined with the shock of being forced south by the barbarian Jin and new foundations of belief within Daoism, this shed a much more positive light on Guan Yu and the Shu kingdom as a whole. When the Mongols invaded, I would argue that Guan Yu's greatest advantage was the fact that all three parties involved, the Mongols, the Jürchen and the Han Chinese, respected the religious status he had accumulated so far. This allowed Guan Yu to pass through the Song-Yuan transition relatively unscathed. This also shows from the fact that Guan Yu was appointed some prominent positions within the rites of the Yuan state religion of Tibetan Buddhism.⁶⁸ Throughout the Yuan new works of writing emerged which helped strengthen Guan Yu's religious position, including the *Particular Books on Lord Guan*, the strongly religiously tinged *zaju* and the first versions of the *Plain Language*. The latter two were most likely inspired by a newly invigorated interest in the Three Kingdoms period, through

66 Yan (2006), p. 151

67 Zhu (1172) in Yan (2006), p. 112

68 Yan (2006), pp. 179-181

the increasing popularity of Storytelling over the Song. Although such sources as Idema & West (2012) do not agree that these stories served as direct inspiration to the development of the Three Kingdoms narrative,⁶⁹ I would argue that even if they did not directly inspire these official narratives, they did contribute to relaying the history of the Three Kingdoms, albeit in narrative form, to the general populace, and thereby they did, directly or indirectly, make their mark on the story, as local ideas about the story always leave somewhat of an imprint on the officially released versions. As mentioned, the *zaju* were strongly religiously tinged, and this shows as well from some customs that were present in performing them. After all, religion and drama have always been interconnected in Chinese culture.⁷⁰ Overall, the Song-Yuan transition had been very relevant to Guan Yu's religious status, as, Yan (2006) tells, the less centralized society also allowed temples and shrines to Guan Yu to emerge in larger cities⁷¹, making for a very stable foundation for the belief in Guan Yu.

In the Ming, Guan Yu's image was more or less already settled, and was more so simply being further sculpted than actually still taking shape. This shows from such facts as that at this point he was not appointed many new functions, but mostly his existing ones, which he had obtained with different population groups over the years, as indicated by Duara (1988)⁷², were being expanded. In addition, he was receiving many new titles. Duara tells us that the belief in Imperial China was common that the higher a deity's official title, the greater their power.⁷³ From this we can conclude that at this point, Guan Yu was definitely already considered a proper deity, as by the late Ming the title of *di* 帝 'emperor' was officially bestowed upon him. Other sources seem to reflect this as well. Li (2011), who approaches the issue of Guan Yu from an

69 Idema & West (2012), pp. 316-317

70 Hong (1995), pp. 118-119

71 Yan (2006), p. 176

72 Duara (1988), p. 781-784

73 Duara (1988), p. 783

anthropological angle, notes that the Yuan and Qing courts were especially eager to show their reverence for Guan Yu, as he was quickly becoming a symbol of the Han Chinese, and therefore a perfect way for the Mongol and Manchu dynasties to legitimize their rule.⁷⁴ In addition, as more Chinese started to travel abroad, bringing images of their deities, including Guan Yu, his image also spread internationally over this time, and quickly came to symbolize Chinese culture as a whole.⁷⁵ Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the rapid canonization of Guan Yu within the leading Confucian ideology over the Ming and the Qing and his eventual juxtaposition with Confucius,⁷⁶ are clearly a sign that by this time the Imperial Court was more than eager to accept Guan Yu within its ranks as an official deity. As his image was continuing to undergo further embellishment with Confucian ideals, the *yi* □ Guan Yu symbolized started to cling ever closer to the ideal of *yi* as displayed in Confucianism.⁷⁷ Such sources as Lei (2009) and Lei (2010) even claim that during the Ming and Qing the Three Kingdoms story was, through Guan Yu, being used to promote Confucian doctrine.⁷⁸ However, sources such as Huang (1968) argue that Guan Yu's *yi* is of an entirely different kind than the Confucian *yi*,⁷⁹ and Zhang (2011) that Guan Yu's character is not as linearly positive as scholars often believe.⁸⁰ Either way, the imperial court's efforts to canonize Guan Yu within their Confucian ideology stand as a strong indication of his relevance as a deity by this point.

Conclusion

74 Li (2011), p. 491

75 Li (2011), p. 495

76 Yan (2006), p. 186; Duara (1980), p. 784-785

77 Li (2011), p. 485-486

78 Lei (2009), p. 28; Lei (2010), p. 116

79 Huang (1968), p. 80

80 Zhang (2011), p. 78

In conclusion, it is problematic to give a comprehensive answer to the question whether the Three Kingdoms story or Guan Yu worship made a bigger impact on the other. That is to say, depending on the point of view from which it is approached, an argument can be made for both sides, as I have attempted to display. What shows from this study is that for both the development of the story and Guan Yu's religious scene is that the most relevant period would be between the Song and the Ming dynasties.

Guan Yu as portrayed in the Three Kingdoms story has undergone a significant change over the years. In the *Records*, it is quite clear that he was considered merely a soldier, allegedly massively strong and brave, although it has to be noted that this might be a laudation by Chen Shou, who was himself from Shu. He was very close with his lord and friend Liu Bei and his comrade Zhang Fei, and, judging from some of the commentaries, an actual oath might have been sworn between them. In the *Plain Language* he loses some ground, mainly to Zhang Fei and Zhuge Liang. When finally the *Romance* appeared during the Ming, Guan Yu was already considered a proper deity, and the author of the *Romance* definitely had more to consider when describing him than Chen Shou had 1200 years ago. Guan Yu gains more appearances in the story, which allow him to display both his might and his strong sense of justice and propriety perfectly. What is notable is that several additions made in the Qing edition of the story indicate that even then Guan Yu's image was still changing, as still more supernatural occurrences involving Guan Yu were incorporated into the story.

Guan Yu as a religious figure did not see any extraordinary development until the Song. From the Western Jin onward he was definitely respected, but not more or less than any other historical warrior who died for his country. During the Tang, Guan Yu, like any other martial figure, came under heavy assault from the literati. During this time across the country it was only

Jiang Taigong who managed to barely retain his status, and Guan Yu was driven back to his initial shrine on the Yuquan Mountain. Through this period of strife his cult did develop strong ties with the neighboring Buddhist temple, as Buddhism was suffering comparable blows from the dominant Daoism and later Neo-Confucianism. After the Jürchen invasion during the Song, the Imperial court was strongly reminded of its mortality, and with a new general attitude towards the Three Kingdoms story, Shu gained its reputation as the rightful successors of the Han, and Guan Yu was allowed slightly more breathing space. Meanwhile the Daoists were starting to superscribe their own myths onto Guan Yu's religious image. After the Mongol invasion, Guan Yu was able to transition surprisingly smoothly into the Yuan as a result of mutual reverence towards him from the Mongols, the Jürchen and the Han Chinese. He became a way for the Mongols to legitimize themselves as the new rulers of China, and through the relaxation of imperial control, temples to Guan Yu managed to pop up in bigger cities. Finally, through such means as the plays on the Three Kingdoms, the story and the religious image of Guan Yu quickly spread across the population. By the Ming, Guan Yu worship was already recognized as an official religious group, and his clashes with imperial and Confucian doctrine were swiftly resolved. By this time Guan Yu's image was settled securely enough to develop on its own, and so it did. By the Qing Guan Yu had successfully risen from the status of tragic historical warrior to proper deity, his identity reaching from the relatively simple idea of a god of war, to a symbol of justice and righteousness, a protector of the general public and a god of wealth.

Now how do these two shades to Guan Yu's image compare? As mentioned before, I found two ways to approach the issue. Firstly, it's possible to say that Guan Yu's religious image was the first to really come to fruition. It is clear from both the *Romance* and the imperial

attitude towards Guan Yu that by then, his image as a deity was already established, and the way he is portrayed in the *Romance* mostly reflects efforts to polish his religious identity, rather than still establishing it, which was clearly the case at the time the *Plain Language* was written. In my opinion, both the *Plain Language* and the *zaju* plays show somewhat of a hesitation as to how to portray Guan Yu. Where in the *Records* he is clearly displayed as purely human, and in the *Romance*, wherever possible, as a deity, the *Plain Language* and *zaju* seem to try to occupy a middle ground between these two, touching upon Guan Yu's religious identity, but not clearly reinforcing or denying it. In the *Plain Language* this is visible from the fact that a lot of the attention is turned towards Zhuge Liang and Zhang Fei instead. In the case of Zhuge Liang this is not too surprising, since he has always been enjoying a lot of attention when it comes to the Three Kingdoms, but Zhang Fei previously had been at best on equal footing with Guan Yu, and he's certainly no lower than that in the *Plain Language*. In the *zaju* I see the same in the way Guan Yu's heroic deeds are portrayed: most of his efforts are being praised by others, or somehow show from his posture, manners or speech. It is only rarely that he is actually being displayed performing them. In contrast, the Ming dynasty *zaju* by Zhu Youdun, instead, showcases his defeat and decapitation of Yan Liang without hesitation. To me, this clearly indicates a change in attitude towards Guan Yu. Lastly, as mentioned before, both forms of the story are very vague about his death, the *zaju* rarely performing it, and if they did, accompanying it with many sacrifices, and the *Plain Language* just covering it up with a mysterious setting, letting it slide by that way. This shows, in my opinion that at the time of these stories, Guan Yu's religious image had been established well before the Three Kingdoms narrative took its final form as the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, at which point Guan Yu's religious image was mostly being polished.

On the other hand, I do not think Guan Yu would've gained as much ground as a religious figure without the story progressing alongside him. It was not until the southern Song, when the story of the Three Kingdoms became more popular due to the barbarian threat and the new attitude towards the story of 'respect Liu and turn away from Cao', as well as the development of the storyteller profession, that Guan Yu was really allowed into the spotlights again, and from there his religious image was rapidly being developed, through the proliferation of myths by their Buddhist and Daoist allies. However, the basis on which this development managed to take place, was the increasing popularity of the Three Kingdoms story and the newfound role for the kingdom of Shu as rightful successor to the Han dynasty. Without those, I believe it would be entirely feasible that Guan Yu would have remained a local deity, as he was during the Tang. He might've risen to the position of *zhanshen* one day, but he would've burned out eventually like so many *zhanshen* did before him.

Therefore, I do not think the question which of the Three Kingdoms story and Guan Yu's religious image influenced the other more has a definite answer. In my opinion, Guan Yu's religious image had settled way before the eventual form of the Three Kingdoms story, viz. the *Romance*, did, but the development of his religious image did flourish under the development of the Three Kingdoms story over the Song before the story reached that point. This explains such obscurities as the fact that Guan Yu's image didn't really take off until the Song, even though it had been nearly a thousand years after the war. In addition, the final form of the Three Kingdoms story shows strong signs of influence from Guan Yu's religious image. So in a way, both can be argued as being integral to the other's existence, or at least to their taking shape the way they did.

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Appendix 1: Character list

People:

關	Guān Yǔ	Also known as Yunchang 雲長 legendary warrior from the Three Kingdoms era, sworn brother to Liu Bei and Zhang Fei and one of the Five Tiger generals of Shu
劉	Liú Bèi	Lord of the Shu kingdom during the Three Kingdoms era, sworn brother to Guan Yu and Zhang Fei and one of the Five Tiger generals of Shu
張	Zhāng Fēi	Sworn brother to Liu Bei and Zhang Fei
曹	Cáo Cāo	Lord of the Wei kingdom during the Three Kingdoms era
孫	Sūn Quàn	Lord of the Wu kingdom during the Three Kingdoms era
司	Sīmǎ Yán	Founding emperor of the Western Jin dynasty
諸	Zhūgě Liàng	Strategist under the kingdom of Shu
胡	Hú Shì	Writer during the late Qing dynasty and Republic of China
魯	Lǔ Xùn	Writer during the late Qing dynasty and Republic of China
陳	Chén Shòu	Author of the <i>Records of the Three Kingdoms</i>
趙	Zhào Yún	One of the Five Tiger generals of Shu, trusted retainer of Liu Bei
馬	Mǎ Chāo	One of the Five Tiger generals of Shu
黃	Huáng Zhòng	One of the Five Tiger generals of Shu
朱	Zhū Yǒudùn	Popular <i>zaju</i> playwright during the Ming dynasty
關	Guān Hànrīng	Popular <i>zaju</i> playwright during the Yuan dynasty
呂	Lǚ Bù	General under Dong Zhuo and later a warlord in the events leading up to the Three Kingdoms, considered the strongest warrior of his time
呂	Lǚ Sù	Advisor and strategist under the kingdom of Wu
黃	Huángfǔ Sōng	General at the start of the Three Kingdoms, who enlisted Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei in their first battle against the Yellow Turbans
嚴	Yán Liáng	Chief general of Yuan Shao, slain by Guan Yu, one of the latter's most fabled victories
袁	Yuán Shào	Warlord and noble, once a friend to Cao Cao, later one of his greatest rivals
陳	Chē Zhòu	Magistrate of Xuzhou, slain by Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, in an attempt by Cao Cao to entrap Liu Bei in order to attack him
張	Zhāng Liáo	Officer under warlord Lü Bu, and later the kingdom of Wei. Friend to Guan Yu
王	Wén Chòu	Chief general of Yuan Shao, slain by Guan Yu,
蔡	Cài Yáng	Officer under the kingdom of Wei, pursues Guan Yu after his service under Cao Cao against the latter's orders. Guan Yu slays him to prove his loyalty to Liu Bei
周	Zhōu Cāng	Former Yellow Turban rebel, came to be one of Guan Yu's most trusted retainers
孫	Sūn Jiàn	Father of Sun Quan, lord of the Eastern Wu until his death
韓	Hán Fǔ	Unknown Wu soldier mentioned in the <i>Records of the Three</i>

		<i>Kingdoms in Plain Language</i> , who shot Guan Yu in the arm with a poisoned arrow
□□	Huà Tuó	Fabled physician, performed a surgical operation on Guan Yu, who was shot by a poisoned arrow, by scraping the poison off his bone
□□□	Zhèng Guāngzǔ	Also known as Zheng Dehui □□□, popular Zaju playwright during the Yuan dynasty
□□□	Gōngsūn Zàn	General during the late Han dynasty, friend of Liu Bei, who also joined him in the fight against Dong Zhuo in the <i>Records of the Three Kingdoms in Plain Language</i> and <i>Romance of the Three Kingdoms</i>
□□	Huà Xióng	General of Dong Zhuo, slain by Guan Yu, one of the latter's first great achievements in the <i>Romance of the Three Kingdoms</i>
□□	Guān Píng	Adopted son of Guan Yu
□□	Cáo Rén	Cousin of Cao Cao, in charge of protecting Fancheng when Guan Yu assaulted it
□□	Páng Dé	Officer in the Kingdom of Wei. Sent as reinforcements to Fancheng when Guan Yu assaulted it. Slain by Guan Yu
□□	Yú Jìn	Officer in the Kingdom of Wei. Sent as reinforcements to Fancheng when Guan Yu assaulted it. Surrendered to Guan Yu after being defeated, then beheaded by him
□□	Lǚ Méng	Officer and strategist in the Kingdom of Wu. Led the attack from behind on Guan Yu which led to the latter's death
□□	Mí Fāng	Officer under the Kingdom of Shu, defected to Wu out of spite for Guan Yu and contributed to Guan Yu's death
□□□	Fù Shìrén	Officer under the Kingdom of Shu, defected to Wu out of spite for Guan Yu and contributed to Guan Yu's death
□□	Xú Hǔang	Officer under the Kingdom of Wei, sent as reinforcements to assist the joint attack on Guan Yu by Wei and Wu
□□	Liú Fēng	Adopted son of Liu Bei, refused to send reinforcements to Guan Yu when the latter was being attacked by Wei and Wu
□□	Chén Dēng	Friend of Liu Bei's, mentioned in the <i>Records of the Three Kingdoms in Plain Language</i> as having fled from Wei and taking refuge with Guan Yu
□□□	Sīmǎ Yì	Strategist under the Kingdom of Wei
□□□	Zhūgē Jǐn	Brother of Zhuge Liang, who served under the kingdom of Wu. Often sent to mediate between Shu and Wu
□□	Lù Xùn	Strategist under the kingdom of Wu, whose succession of Lü Meng was used to tempt Guan Yu into attacking Fancheng
□□	Huāngdì	Yellow Emperor, mythological hero, later regarded as a symbol of the imperial system
□□	Chǐ Yóu	Mythological spawn of evil, defeated by the Yellow Emperor. Reappears in one of the earliest Daoist myths about Guan Yu
□□□	Jiāng Tàigōng	Strategist during the end of the Shang dynasty (c. 1100 BC), long

		revered as a <i>zhanshen</i> . Also known as Jiang Ziya 姜子牙 or Taigong Wang 太公望. Later often juxtaposed with and eventually more or less replaced by Guan Yu
□□	Zhū Xī	Neo-Confucianist philosopher during the Song. Wrote a commentary to the Zizhi Tongjian which advocated a novel approach towards the Three Kingdoms story
□□□	Luó Guànzōng	Assumed author of the <i>Romance of the Three Kingdoms</i>
□□□	Zhào Gōngmíng	Early Chinese god of wealth, later replaced by Guan Yu

Places:

□	Wèi	Also known as Cao Wei 魏, one of the Three Kingdoms, led by Cao Cao
□	Shǔ	Also known as Shu Han 蜀, one of the Three Kingdoms, led by Liu Bei
□	Wú	Also known as Eastern Wu 吴, one of the Three Kingdoms, led by Sun Quan
□	Jìn	Also known as Western Jin 晋, dynasty subsequent to the Three Kingdoms era
□□	Jīngzhōu	Jing province, province in central China, and strategic location during the Three Kingdoms. Guan Yu was charged with its protection and died there as well
□□	Xièzhōu	Birthplace of Guan Yu, called Jiěliàng 解良 in some sources
□□	Zhuòjūn	Birthplace of Zhang Fei, meeting place of Guan Yu, Zhang Fei and Liu Bei
□□	Píngyuán	Place where Liu Bei was appointed his first office
□□	Xǔcháng	Capital of the latter Han under Cao Cao, later also capital of Wei
□□	Xúzhōu	Province handed over to Liu Bei by the previous magistrate, from which Liu Bei was then driven by Lü Bu, and later by Cao Cao
□□	Báimǎ	Strategic location in Guandu county, in defense of which Guan Yu slew Yan Liang
□□	Xiàpī	Strategic location close to Xuzhou, where Lü Bu was trapped before being bound by his own retainers and surrendered to Cao Cao and where Guan Yu was charged with protecting Liu Bei's wives, immediately prior to his surrender to Cao Cao
□□	Gǔchéng	Place where Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei are known be reunited after Guan Yu's service under Cao Cao
□□	Xiǎopèi	Strategic location close to Xuzhou, to where Liu Bei was forced to retreat after Lü Bu wrested control of Xuzhou from him
□□	Yízhōu	Territory in the southeast of China, where Liu Bei settles the kingdom of Shu
□□	Fànchéng	Fan castle, city on the border of Jingzhou, controlled by Cao Cao. Guan Yu's attack on this castle eventually led to his death
□□	Màichéng	City on the edge of Jingzhou, where Guan Yu tried to flee after being defeated, before being intercepted by the Wu soldiers and captured
□□	Hànzhōng	County in Yizhou, of which Liu Bei pronounced himself king

Yǔquán Shān	Yuquan mountain, mountain close to the place where Guan Yu died, where his spirit went in the <i>Romance of the Three Kingdoms</i> , and the first shrine to Guan Yu was set up
Jīn	Not to be confused with Jin 金, kingdom of the Jürchen which had taken control of north China after the Song had been forced south

Other:

Sānjiè Fú mó Dàdì	‘Demon-subduing Grand Emperor across the three realms’, posthumous title bestowed upon Guan Yu during the Ming dynasty
Guān Gōng	‘Lord Guan’, popular address for Guan Yu, officially bestowed upon him as a title during the Song
Sānguózhì	<i>Records of the Three Kingdoms</i> , historical <i>Records of the Three Kingdoms</i> era, written during the Western Jin dynasty
Sānguózhì Píng huà	<i>Records of the Three Kingdoms in Plain Language</i> , first attempt at a narrative on the Three Kingdoms era, written during the Yuan Dynasty
Sānguó Yǎnyì	<i>Romance of the Three Kingdoms</i> , novel on the Three Kingdoms era, written during the Ming dynasty, edited during the Qing dynasty, one of the four classic Chinese novels.
Wuhu Jiang	The Five Tiger generals, Five of Liu Bei’s fiercest and most trusted generals: Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun, Ma Chao and Huang Zhong
Sānguózhì Tōngsù Yǎnyì	<i>Common novelization of the Records of the Three Kingdoms</i> , the first 240-chapter version of the <i>Romance of the Three Kingdoms</i> , edited to its current 120-chapter state during the Qing dynasty
Shuǐhǔzhuàn	<i>The Water Margin</i> , one of the four classic Chinese novels
Xīyóují	<i>Journey to the West</i> , one of the four classic Chinese novels
Hónglòuměng	<i>Dream of the Red Chamber</i> , one of the four classic Chinese novels
Zhòngyì	Loyalty and Righteousness, two moral qualities which Guan Yu came to embody.
Guān Yǔ zhuàn	‘Records on Guan Yu’, subchapter in the <i>Records of the Three Kingdoms</i> on Guan Yu
xiàng	Administrator, government minister in imperial China
Sīmǎ	Defender-in-Chief, military rank in imperial China
Xiānzhǔ zhuàn	‘Records on the First Ruler’, chapter in the <i>Records of the Three Kingdoms</i> on Liu Bei
Zhāng Fēi zhuàn	‘Records on Zhang Fei’, subchapter in the <i>Records of the Three Kingdoms</i> on Zhang Fei
Wūdì jì	‘Chronicles of the Martial Emperor’, chapter in the <i>Records of the Three Kingdoms</i> on Cao Cao
Xiǎnchéng	Assistant-Magistrate, government title in imperial China
Piān Jiāngjūn	Outstanding General, title given to Guan Yu by Cao Cao upon Guan Yu’s surrender to Cao Cao

□□□□	Hànshòutíng hóu	Marquis of Hanshouting, title bestowed upon Guan Yu by Cao Cao after the defeat of Yuan Shao at Baima. Often wrongly interpreted as ‘Han Marquis of Shouting’
□□	Huángshū	Imperial Uncle, honorary title bestowed upon Liu Bei by the Han emperor
□□□	Lǚ Sù zhuàn	‘Records on Lu Su’, subchapter in the <i>Records of the Three Kingdoms</i> on Lu Su
□	Yǔ	Fifth tone of the Chinese pentatonic scale; used in the <i>Records of the Three Kingdoms in Plain Language</i> in a pun aimed at ridiculing Guan Yu
□□□	Lǚ Méng zhuàn	‘Records on Lü Meng’, subchapter in the <i>Records of the Three Kingdoms</i> on Lü Meng
□□□	Chuándēng Lù	<i>Transmission of the Lamp</i> , Zen Buddhist work which mentions some of the first myths about Guan Yu, referenced in the <i>Sanguozhi Tongsu Yanyi</i>
□□	zájù	‘Assorted plays’, a style of drama popular during the Yuan dynasty
□□	zhànshén	‘God of war’, term rather loosely applied to historical heroes who had been worshipped or deified after their death
□□	Wénwū	Wen (culture) and Wu (military), two very important concepts in imperial China
□□□□	Zīzhì Tōngjiàn	<i>Comprehensive mirror in aid of governance</i> , historical chronicle written during the Song
□□□□	Zūn Liú fǎn Cáo	‘Respect Liu and turn away from Cao’, leading attitude towards the Three Kingdoms story from the Southern Song onward, which honored Shu as the rightful successor of the Han and Wei as traitors to the empire
□□	Shuōhuà	The profession of storytelling, also known as jiangshi □□, which gained in popularity over the Song dynasty
□□□□	Guāngōng Zhuànshū	‘Particular books on Lord Guan’, a style of books appearing over the Yuan, aimed at spreading belief in Guan Yu as a deity
□□□□	Chūnqiū Zuǒzhuàn	<i>Zuo’s commentary to the Spring and Autumn annals</i> , one of four famous commentaries to the Zhou dynasty chronicle <i>Chunqiu</i> ‘Spring and Autumn’. In later versions of the Three Kingdoms story often mentioned as Guan Yu’s favorite read
□□	Cáishén	God of Wealth
□□	Guāndì	‘Emperor Guan’, posthumous title bestowed upon Guan Yu at the end of the Ming dynasty