

From General to Cultural Symbol

— The Romance of Three Kingdoms and the History of Changes in Guan Yu Persona

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Abstract: *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* holds a prominent position among the “Four Great Classics” within the realm of Chinese classical literature. The aforementioned literary work was authored by Luo Guanzhong, a novelist from the Ming Dynasty, and it draws its inspiration from actual occurrences that transpired during the Three Kingdoms era towards the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty. Guan Yu holds a prominent position as a highly recognized figure throughout the literary work titled *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The individual in concern has undergone significant influence from several historical dynasties, resulting in the development of a multifaceted and intricate persona. This study aims to examine the development of the character “Guan Yu” in the literary work *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and the subsequent construction of cultural memory surrounding “Guan Yu.” This will be achieved via a comprehensive literature research and analytical approach. This research aims to enhance the understanding of the evolutionary trajectory and underlying factors that contributed to the transformation of Guan Yu from a historical persona to a literary construct, culminating in his universal veneration within folk culture. Furthermore, this investigation seeks to elucidate the influence exerted by the literary work *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* on this transformative process.”

Keywords: Guan Yu, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, cultural memory, Luo Guanzhong

1. Introduction

Currently, there is extensive scholarly research being undertaken on classical novels from ancient China, with particular emphasis on novels from the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. The majority of these studies commence with a literary standpoint, wherein they undertake an analysis of the textual substance or the novelist and the historical period in which they are situated. Nevertheless, the examination of a particular character inside the narrative is rather deficient. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* occupies a prominent position among Chinese classical novels, and it has been the subject of several scholarly investigations and interpretations. Nevertheless, in the realm of scholarly discourse, the examination of the character Guan Yu inside the novel is predominantly undertaken by researchers who adopt one of two distinct views. One perspective entails conducting a comprehensive

examination of the historical figure General Guan Yu, encompassing aspects such as his place of birth, his tenure as a military commander, and his notable accomplishments on the battlefield. An alternative viewpoint is commencing the analysis from the veneration of the deified Guan Yu within the Chinese populace, followed by an examination of the evolutionary trajectory of Guan Yu as a deity revered by individuals.

This study aims to integrate two theoretical perspectives, employing literature review and comparative research methods, with a focus on the theory of cultural memory. Specifically, it will examine the textual content of *Records of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* to analyze the historical transformations of the persona of Guan Yu.

This study aims to offer a novel perspective on the portrayal of Guan Yu in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* by Luo Guanzhong, with the intention of enhancing readers' comprehension and appreciation of the reasons and significance of the author's depiction. By examining the evolution of Guan Yu's character across history, this study aims to enhance the understanding of the cultural memory hypothesis.

2. The Evolutionary History of the Story and Legend of “Guan Yu”

The initial inquiry that necessitates study is to the process by which Guan Yu underwent a metamorphosis from a military commander in the historical context of the Three Kingdoms era to an emblematic figure within the realm of culture. Understanding the developmental trajectory of Guan Yu and the building of collective memory surrounding him is of utmost importance. During the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, a prevailing social environment emerged, characterized by the glorification of heroic figures, which can be attributed to the numerous conflicts and the prevalence of feudal separatism. Consequently, narratives recounting the exploits of notable military commanders from the relatively recent Three Kingdoms period gained widespread popularity. Throughout this particular era, there was a frequent association between the names and accomplishments of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, resulting in the colloquial usage of “Guan&Zhang” as a term synonymous with valiant military leaders. During this particular historical period, Guan Yu's status remained that of a general within the Three Kingdoms era, albeit with the emergence of his courageous narrative already gaining traction [1]. During this particular era, numerous intellectuals starting incorporating the words and actions of certain individuals from the Three Kingdoms period into their literary works, such as the renowned “Shi Shuo Xin Yu” authored by Liu Yiqing. However, the aforementioned manuscripts exhibit a notable scarcity of references to Guan Yu, leading to the speculation that during that period, Guan Yu and his narrative were not held in high regard by the literati.

During the Sui and Tang dynasties, ancient Chinese culture had a period of heightened development, characterized by political stability and economic prosperity. Consequently, there was a notable shift in societal focus towards the concept of a “prosperous civilization”. During the contemporary period, with the waning of armed conflicts, the valorous exploits of General Guan Yu have progressively faded from the collective memory of society. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the Jin Dynasty, which played a pivotal role in the unification of the Three Kingdoms, perceived Guan Yu's Shu realm as the defeated party in this conflict. Hence, under a politically stable context, Guan Yu, in his capacity as a vanquished military leader, would inevitably garner assessments imbued with a sense of remorse from the populace. During this particular era, there was a notable scarcity of scholarly discourse pertaining to the substantive aspects of Guan Yu, with the prevailing emphasis being predominantly centered on his valorous attributes. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy to state that Guan Yu's religious standing had an enhancement throughout this particular timeframe. The phenomenon can be attributed, in part, to the expeditious evolution of religious ideologies in China during the Sui and Tang dynasties, as well as the geographical significance of Guan Yu's demise in

Jingzhou. Jingzhou is situated inside the Chu region, an area renowned for its longstanding sacrifice culture, as exemplified by the prominent figures of Qu Yuan and the literary masterpiece *Chu Ci*. Following the demise of Guan Yu in Jingzhou, a number of stories emerged within the Chu region, depicting his ethereal assistance to the local populace. During this period, Guan Yu emerged as a guardian of the Dharma inside Buddhist beliefs, owing to the swift dissemination of religious ideologies. Furthermore, it was during the tenure of Empress Wu of the Tang Dynasty that the ruling authorities made the strategic decision to administer military aptitude evaluations known as *Wu Ju*, with a particular emphasis on the development and nurturing of military leaders [2]. During that period, a martial temple was constructed with the purpose of honoring numerous renowned military commanders from the past, among them Guan Yu. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that he held the rank of general during the Three Kingdoms era, where he found himself in the company of his adversaries Zhou Yu and Zhang Liao. It is important to highlight that he did not possess any distinctive attributes or characteristics that set him apart from his counterparts. In the context of the Sui and Tang dynasties, it can be observed that the persona of Guan Yu underwent certain degrees of diversification. However, when juxtaposed with other generals of the Three Kingdoms period, it becomes apparent that Guan Yu did not possess a distinctively exceptional status.

The transformation of Guan Yu from an army general in the Three Kingdoms period to a revered figure as a “sage” or “heavenly god” occurred throughout the Song and Yuan eras. Simultaneously, there was a notable surge in the general public’s veneration of Guan Yu. In the course of this particular undertaking, the preeminent narrative is documented in the writings of Hu Qi, a learned individual hailing from the Yuan Dynasty, in his literary work entitled “The Story of the King of Guan”. During the Northern Song Dynasty, the salt industry held a key position within the economy. However, the salt ponds located in Xie County experienced a decline in salt production due to droughts caused by natural climatic conditions and other factors.

According to the narrative of “The Story of King Guan,” there’s a prevailing belief among the populace that the occurrence of drought in the salt pond can be attributed to the hindrance caused by the malevolent spirit of Chi You. The Taoist Heavenly Master Zhang sought assistance from the soul of Guan Yu, successfully vanquished Chi You, and effectively resolved the issue of drought. Hence, during the Song Dynasty, the ruling authorities, as a gesture of appreciation and reverence towards Guan Yu, bestowed upon him the honorary title of “Chongning Zhenjun” and erected a temple dedicated to his veneration and commemoration. The tale surrounding Guan Yu’s triumph over Chi You has variations across multiple accounts, yet the fundamental narrative remains largely consistent. In the aforementioned scriptures, Guan Yu was selected as the heroic figure to vanquish Chi You on account of his unwavering allegiance and exceptional courage. Despite the presence of false legends within these narratives, they possess the capacity to depict the gradual elevation of Guan Yu’s stature commencing from the Song Dynasty and extending thereafter. The resolution of the drought through the defeat of Chi You resulted in the subsequent promotion of salt production in salt ponds, thereby fostering the advancement of the salt industry. This mythology additionally provides an explanation for the veneration of Guan Yu by the people, who perceive him as the deity associated with wealth and as a protective guardian to some degree. The soul of Guan Yu possesses the capacity to triumph against malevolence, safeguard the progress of economic endeavors, and ensure the well-being of individuals. One of the most compelling forms of evidence that might serve as a reflection of the ruler’s favoritism towards Guan Yu is the bestowed title attributed to him. During the Song Dynasty, Guan Yu was bestowed with various titles, including “Duke of Zhonghui” and “King of Wu’an”. During the Southern Song Dynasty, the prevailing political fragmentation and social unrest inside the kingdom led to a notable surge in both the rulers’ and the populace’s veneration of Guan Yu. In the midst of a tumultuous social milieu, Guan Yu assumes the dual roles of a guardian deity and a deity of prosperity, so bestowing upon individuals a sense of tranquility and affluence. The spirit of Guan

Yu, characterized by honesty, loyalty, and a lack of thirst for wealth, together with his willingness to make sacrifices, has served as a source of spiritual nourishment for intellectuals, enabling them to uphold principles of nobility and integrity during periods of turmoil.

An indicative instance can be found in the writings of Nan Tao, a prominent scholar during the Southern Song Dynasty. In his work titled “Record of the Restoration of the Shaoxing Temple,” Nan Tao extols the valor and martial prowess of Guan Yu, a renowned general. Notably, Nan Tao emphasizes Guan Yu’s unwavering loyalty, as he resisted the allure of wealth and fame offered by Cao Cao, steadfastly remaining by Liu Bei’s side until his final breath. The aforementioned aspect was frequently overlooked by past scholars in their discussions regarding Guan Yu. The veneration and reverence towards Guan Yu during the Song Dynasty were essentially passed down and afterwards expanded upon during the Yuan Dynasty. During the Yuan Dynasty, there was a notable surge in the popularity of traditional Chinese opera, which played a significant role in the distribution and increased familiarity of Guan Yu’s persona among the general populace. The aforementioned literary piece, titled “The Story of King Guan,” was composed during the Yuan Dynasty. The renowned playwright Guan Hanqing, who flourished during the Yuan Dynasty, crafted a theatrical work titled “The Single Sword Banquet.” This play narrates the account of Guan Yu, who, in a daring display, attends an adversary’s feast armed solely with a formidable sword. Within the narrative, Guan Yu exemplifies exceptional valor and sagacity. The rulers of the Yuan Dynasty likewise maintained the practice of bestowing titles onto Guan Yu. In the year 1327 AD, the title “Xian Ling Yi Yong Wu An Ying Ji King” was bestowed upon Guan Yu. Consequently, as a result of this foundation, the titles bestowed upon Guan Yu progressively increased in length. The extensive titles originated not alone from the kings, but also from the veneration shown upon them by the populace. The number of temples dedicated to the veneration of Guan Yu is steadily increasing.

In accordance with the scholarly work titled “Record of Rebuilding Temples” authored by Hao Jing during the Yuan Dynasty, it is stated that a multitude of temples specifically devoted to the veneration of Guan Yu may be found in each county and hamlet. These pieces of evidence collectively demonstrate the widespread dissemination of the myth and legend of Guan Yu during the Yuan Dynasty. At present, it is possible to infer that during the late Yuan Dynasty and early Ming Dynasty, Luo Guanzhong initiated the composition of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. During this period, Guan Yu had already evolved into a cultural symbol, transcending various dynasties. Consequently, the fundamental narrative surrounding the persona of Guan Yu had been established and achieved a state of relative stability.

3. Luo Guanzhong’s Construction of “Guan Yu”

During the preceding discourse, it has been shown that during the commencement of Luo Guanzhong’s literary endeavors, a multitude of narratives pertaining to the Three Kingdoms era, particularly those concerning the legendary exploits of Guan Yu, had already attained significant dissemination. The narratives under consideration are situated inside the literary work known as the “Records of the Three Kingdoms,” authored by the esteemed historian Chen Shou during the Jin Dynasty. It is worth noting that these accounts incorporate a significant number of fictional or imaginative elements, hence enhancing their literary appeal. However, it is worth noting that the various stories and legends surrounding Guan Yu exhibit a notable lack of coherence in terms of both chronology and narrative structure. It is widely accepted that the author of the *Sanguo yanyi* drew upon the official historical account as a foundation for the overall sequence of events, the ensemble of characters, and certain elements of dialogue. However, the author’s portrayal of Liu Bei, the leader of the Shu kingdom, was largely influenced by fictionalized interpretations found in contemporary narratives, theatrical performances, and texts associated with the performing arts. The user has provided a reference to support their statement. The purpose of this discourse is to classify the

depiction of Guan Yu in the literary work within the same genre as Liu Bei. Based on extant scholarship, it is evident that prior to Luo Guanzhong's renowned literary work, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the sole comprehensive written account documenting the events of the Three Kingdoms period was the *Complete Records of the Three Kingdoms in Plain Words*, authored during the Yuan Dynasty. Nevertheless, the content exhibited a remarkable level of conciseness, as seen by the presence of numerous conflicting storylines, surnames of people, and locations [3]. Hence, upon Luo Guanzhong's initiation of the composition of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the available narrative structure for the account of the Three Kingdoms era was limited to a singular overarching framework: commencing with the waning of the Han Dynasty, progressing through the rivalries among three kingdoms, and culminating in the establishment of the Jin Dynasty. Luo Guanzhong's literary endeavor encompasses not only the comprehensive and sequential depiction of the events of the Three Kingdoms period, but also the deliberate inclusion, omission, or alteration of certain elements, with the aim of portraying more vibrant and nuanced character representations. It is imperative to acknowledge that *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is a work of fiction, hence necessitating the presence of literary merit in order to effectively engage its readership. In contrast to the contents presented in the historical text *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, this inquiry seeks to explore the disparities found within the literary work "Guan Yu" authored by Luo Guanzhong. In this context, the author aims to provide two illustrative instances for the sake of comparison. According to Chen Shou's account in *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, the bond between Guan Yu and his leader Liu Bei can be likened to that of biological brothers, as they shared the same sleeping quarters. Luo Guanzhong dedicates a substantial chapter in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* to expounding upon the intricate dynamics of the relationship between Guan Yu and Liu Bei. Luo Guanzhong portrays a ceremonial act of reverence in his literary work, wherein the characters Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei solemnly pledge to establish a fraternal bond characterized by unwavering loyalty and shared destiny. This refers to the renowned literary work known as 'Tao Yuan Jie Yi'.

All three (Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei) being of one mind, next day they prepared the sacrifices, a black ox, a white horse, and wine for libation. Beneath the smoke of the incense burning on the altar, they bowed their heads and recited this oath:

"We three---Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei---though of different families, swear brotherhood, and promise mutual help to one end. We will rescue each other in difficulty; we will aid each other in danger. We swear to serve the state and save the people. We ask not the same day of birth, but we seek to die together. May Heaven, the all-ruling, and Earth, the all-producing, read our hearts. If we turn aside from righteousness or forget kindness, may Heaven smite us!" [4]

Has Luo Guanzhong created any new content here? Only one small ceremony of worship. The relationship between Guan Yu and Liu Bei in history has not changed at all. Guan Yu remains a loyal general, and Luo Guanzhong only used this method to make people more aware of Guan Yu's virtue of loyalty.

Let's focus on Guan Yu's own work in another example. Guan Yu is a general whose responsibility is to defeat the enemy. In "Records of the Three Kingdoms," Chen Shou wrote that:

Guan Yu saw Yan Liang's flag and chariot from a distance, and mounted a horse to charge forward. He killed Yan Liang in the army and cut off his head before returning. Other generals under Yuan Shao were unable to stop Guan Yu, and the siege of Baima ended in this way [5].

In *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Luo Guanzhong first used some words to describe Yan Liang's ability, including his defeat of a few generals. Yan Liang was believed as a terrible enemy.

Cao Cao was frightened at the force opposed to him and, returning to camp, spoke to Song Xian, who had once served under Lu Bu, saying, "You are one of Lu Bu's famous veteran generals. Can you give battle to this Yan Liang?"

Song Xian agreed to try. He armed himself, mounted, and rode to the front. Yan Liang was there on horseback, his sword lying crossways. Seeing an opponent approaching, he uttered a loud shout and galloped toward Song Xian. The two met, but after only three bouts, Song Xian fell under a mighty slash from Yan Liang's sword.

"What a terrible leader!" said Cao Cao.

"He has slain my comrade, I want to go and avenge him," then cried Wei Xu.

Cao Cao bade him go and he rode out, spear set, and in front of the army railed at Yan Liang. Yan Liang replied not a word, but their two steeds came together; and at the first blow from Yan Liang's sword, Wei Xu's forehead was halved.

"Now, who again dares face him?" cried Cao Cao.

Xu Huang took up the challenge and he went out. The combat endured twenty bouts, and then Xu Huang fled back to his own side. The other generals were now greatly depressed at their failure. Cao Cao withdrew his army, feeling very sad at the loss of two generals in quick succession. Yan Liang also marched off his force [6].

Later, Luo Guanzhong used very vivid and specific words to describe how Guan Yu killed Yan Liang:

Guan Yu quickly mounted, turned down his mighty weapon, and galloped down the hill, his phoenix eyes rounded, and his silkworm eyebrows fiercely bristling. He dashed straight into the enemy's array, and the northern soldiers opened like falling waves and dissolving storms. He made directly for the commander. Now Yan Liang sitting there in state saw a horseman rushing toward him, and just as he began to ask who the rider of the red horse was, lo! the horseman was there. Taken utterly by surprise, the leader could make no defense. Guan Yu's arm rose and the mighty weapon fell. And with it fell Yan Liang.

Leaping from the saddle, Guan Yu cut off his victim's head and hung it to his horse's neck. Then he mounted and rode out, just as if there was no army there [6].

Luo Guanzhong's narrative mostly focuses on highlighting Guan Yu's exceptional martial prowess and his triumph against Yan Liang, without significantly altering the overall course of events. Nevertheless, due to the extensive dissemination of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the event known as "Killing Yan Liang" has ingrained itself as a lasting recollection of Guan Yu's exceptional prowess in martial arts.

In conclusion, the preceding analysis demonstrates that Luo Guanzhong drew upon historical events documented in historical records, particularly "Records of the Three Kingdoms," as the foundation for his literary work, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. However, it is important to note that *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* has numerous fictionalized and speculative elements, as is characteristic of the novel genre. Within this particular portion, the discourse pertained to the inclusion of Guan Yu, whereby Luo Guanzhong undertook the task of reimagining the prevalent narrative surrounding Guan Yu at that era. Consequently, this endeavor resulted in the construction of a valorous and steadfast portrayal that aligned with the collective recollections held by the populace regarding Guan Yu.

4. On the Reasons for the Formation of "Guan Yu" Memory

Ultimately, the focal point of the research is to the rationale for individuals' establishment of a Cultural Memory surrounding the cultural emblem known as "Guan Yu." In essence, what is the underlying objective behind the alteration in the Cultural Memory of "Guan Yu"? In order to address this inquiry, it is imperative to acknowledge the intricate interplay between the formation of the Cultural Memory surrounding "Guan Yu" and the historical context of ancient China. The concept of Cultural Memory does not serve to impart novel information; rather, it reiterates what is already familiar to all individuals. Its purpose extends beyond the mere recollection of the distant and

unalterable past, as described by Aleida Assmann, but rather aims to depict this history as a relevant and contemporary occurrence. The organized and ceremonial gesture described below serves as a means by which the contemporary community affirms its social, religious, political, and cultural identity [7]. As previously said, throughout history, rulers and individuals belonging to different dynasties have consistently sought to evoke collective remembrance of Guan Yu through the bestowal of titles, ceremonial offerings, and other methods, thereby extolling his courageous and unwavering nature. Guan Yu, as a cultural emblem, embodies collective memories. The interpretation of ‘Guan Yu’ varies among individuals of diverse identities. Throughout the annals of many dynasties, Guan Yu has been regarded as a steadfast and loyal general. Historical accounts depict Guan Yu as impervious to the allure of wealth and riches, which were generously offered to him by Cao Cao. Instead, he remained resolute in his allegiance to his lord, Liu Bei, fighting valiantly until his final breath. Through the deliberate emphasis on this aspect, ancient Chinese emperors aspired to establish a paradigmatic illustration of loyalty for their ministers and generals. Consequently, rulers from different dynasties sought to reinforce the collective remembrance of “Guan Yu” by conferring posthumous titles upon him. This passage elucidates the concept of being “shaped and guarded by institutional structures of power” within the context of Cultural Memory. Conversely, in the perspective of Luo Guanzhong, the author of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a literati who actively engaged in combat against the Ming Dynasty army and upheld the authority of the Yuan Dynasty, Guan Yu’s unwavering loyalty also garnered his admiration. For individuals who possess knowledge and admiration for “Guan Yu,” whether it be due to his reputation as a courageous military leader or as a figure embodying principles of justice and empathy towards the populace, it is imperative that “Guan Yu” assumes the role of a symbol of justice within collective memory. This entails fulfilling the expectations and desires of the people, particularly in the historical context of frequent conflicts, widespread famine, and other calamities prevalent in ancient China. In essence, the cultural remembrance of ‘Guan Yu’ can be characterized as a dynamic response to the exigencies of the present. In summary, the transformation of the character “Guan Yu” from diverse folk oral traditions and pre-Luo Guanzhong narratives to the heroic figure shown in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* may be attributed to the evolving cultural memory around “Guan Yu” at that period. It is important to note that this transformation does not pertain to any alterations in Guan Yu’s actions or accomplishments.

5. Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned study, it may be inferred that Guan Yu, according to his historical persona, served solely as a military commander under the Shu faction in the Three Kingdoms era. The extent of his actions documented in the historical text known as the Records of the Three Kingdoms is somewhat restricted. Over the course of time, rulers and individuals belonging to different dynasties commenced the process of molding the persona of Guan Yu, accentuating his attributes of bravery and loyalty in accordance with the exigencies of their respective historical contexts. Legends about Guan Yu gradually surfaced within the realm of popular folklore, thereby elevating his societal standing. Luo Guanzhong’s composition of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* involved a deliberate selection of the prevalent narrative surrounding Guan Yu during that era. Additionally, he incorporated fictional elements to enhance the portrayal of this significant character within the novel, thereby aligning Guan Yu more closely with the collective recollection of him held by the populace.

There are some limitations inherent in my investigation. In the study pertaining to the historical worship of Guan Yu, it is evident that the intricate and multifaceted character of religion research necessitates a more comprehensive approach beyond a mere literature review in order to enhance the persuasiveness of my research. In the future, it is envisioned that the author will engage in on-site

research by visiting temples dedicated to the worship of Guan Yu, as well as sites where the narratives surrounding Guan Yu are extensively disseminated. This research endeavor will be enhanced through active discussion with local adherents, so facilitating the improvement of the author's scholarly investigation.

The Romance of the Three Kingdoms is widely regarded as a remarkable literary work, with the author expressing a profound admiration for the historical figure of Guan Yu. It is anticipated that there will be an increased scholarly interest from various disciplines worldwide in the future about the research on *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and Guan Yu. This is due to the presence of numerous unexplored aspects concealed inside the captivating novel.

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