

On The Three Kingdoms

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I am thrilled to be able to give a talk on the history of The Three Kingdoms. I have spent a great amount of time in my youth in reading this great historical novel. Since I came to this country I have found that this story is also widely read among Thai people. It is wonderful and rewarding to find another common cultural heritage between Thai and Japanese people, who have many such common roots in our civilization, above all those related to Buddhism.

As I went through the materials in preparation for this talk, I found that this year, 1989, is exactly the 300th anniversary of the Japanese translation of the story. In 1689, in the Yedo period in Japan, a classics scholar named **Konan** published 50 volumes of the complete translation of the “**Popular Version of the History of The Three Kingdoms**”. As the title indicates, this was the translation of the popular version which was finally completed in the Ching dynasty during the reign of Emperor Kanxi (1661 - 1722). Therefore, we can presume the text was imported to Japan almost as soon as it was published in China. This popular version is different from the official chronicle of The Three Kingdoms, edited by **Chin - Su** (233 - 297), and originally

a collection of stories told by storytellers of the street. Storytelling is an art which began in China and spread to Korea and to Japan. The History of The Three Kingdoms is a most popular subject for storytellers during the Ming dynasty. When I served in Korea I learned that the stories of The Three Kingdoms were also a popular subject of Korean storytelling. In Japan, however, storytellers, who employed almost the same style as the Chinese, always used as subjects the Japanese Samurai stories and I never heard that they have ever told the story of the History of the Three Kingdoms. Nor did Japanese theatre ever perform this story which is extremely popular in Chinese drama. The stories of The Three Kingdoms have mainly been reading material in Japan. Yet, the story must have been very popular during the Yedo and Meiji periods because I see countless quotations in the writings of these periods. The people of my generation are particularly well read in that history because of the new version published in the late 1930's by a famous writer called **Eiji Yoshikawa**. After the war some new translations were published and also comic - book editions are quite popular, but Yoshikawa's book is almost a standard text of the History of Three Kingdoms in Japan.

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Today I would like to talk about the two letters addressed to the second Emperor by Chu Ke Liang. These are the only two documents which can claim undoubted historicity. I heard that there exists some argument that the second letter is a fake written by somebody else. Certainly, the official chronicle mentions only the first letter. Furthermore, the style and literary value are no doubt much superior in the first letter. I feel, however, having read the text repeatedly that this is either written by Chu Ke Liang himself or by some of his aides who were pursuing the same political cause as Chu Ke Liang. I see no motivations for any later writers to produce such a fake. Its content has so much contemporary value and must have come out of dire contemporary necessity under the political circumstances then prevailing.

Explanations on the full text of two letters

My first motivation to study these rarely-read texts was to learn the strategic thinking of Chu Ke Liang because I have been engaged in strategic study in general. Particularly, according to the popular stories of The Three Kingdoms, Chu Ke Liang is supposed to have been the greatest genius of military tactics and strategy in Chinese history. Having read the full text of the two letters, however, what Chu Ke Liang is trying to promote is the cause of legitimacy of the great Han dynasty and the moral integrity of the government. His strategy is very simple. The entire human and material resources of his country should be devoted to destroying the Empire of Wei and to restoring the Han dynasty. It may not succeed, he frankly admitted, but *first of all* it is morally imperative to do so. *Secondly*, he argued that, since his own country is small and time is running out for it, the country had to stake its claim in any case.

The high literary value of the story of The Three Kingdoms derives from the fact that the



Chu Ke Liang
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entire history is a great tragedy. In every sense the cause pursued by Chu Ke Liang was a right one. The Han dynasty had maintained the integrity and peace of China for four hundred years with a very well organised bureaucracy supported by the morale and manners of Confucianism. It was an ideal kingdom and there existed no other legitimacy in the world at that time. The Han empire was being disintegrated and the traditional morality was collapsing. Chu Ke Liang devoted every moment of his life to the noble cause of restoring the legitimacy and legitimate values of the past, but in vain. His efforts produced nothing. After his death, China enters a Dark Age in the following four centuries. Many kingdoms rose and fell, always by aggression or usurpation, without any moral principle. It was a period when the ruling class were indulging in luxury, licentiousness and cruelty without moral

limitation. The traditional moral and philosophy died out. The only surviving philosophy and literatures are those of transcendentalism, avoiding the ugly world and finding an ideal life in seclusion or hermitage. Nobody ceded a grain of leniency to the respect for legitimacy and integrity, pursued so earnestly by Chu Ke Liang. It is a genuine tragedy that it could happen in some periods of history that one man's efforts could be absolutely fruitless, however his cause is noble and right.

Commentary on texts of letters :

The First Letter

The first two pages are admonitions to the Second Emperor of Shu. It begins with the fact that the late Emperor died midway through his achievement. This is a basic theme to be sounded through these 2 letters. The policy imperative is to recover the integral Han Empire and not to become ensconced in the small Shu Empire. This theme we will find elaborated in the second letter.

So Chu Ke Liang has to leave the Imperial court to go to the front. And this letter appeals to the young Emperor to behave himself during his absence. Chu Ke Liang urges the young Emperor to rely on good men and to keep his distance from bad influence, mentioning particular names whom the young Emperor should consult before taking any action.

It shows that Chu Ke Liang was absolutely respected in the court and his integrity was beyond any criticism so that he could dare to admonish and direct the young Emperor. I feel, however, sorry for the young man. In each sentence Chu Ke Liang quotes the late Emperor. He says people are endeavouring to serve the young Emperor because they are indebted to the late Emperor and wish to repay the debt to his young successor. In each recommended person Chu Ke Liang says " He is good because the late Emperor trusted him. " It must be a terrible pressure on the young



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Second Emperor of Shu

man. I imagine that young man never felt happy during his life. After the surrender of his Empire he was given the humiliating title of " The Prince of Easy Life " in the court of Wei. Somebody asked him confidentially if he was feeling very bitter. He answered simply that " this is the happiest time of my life ". I think these are words coming straight from the young man's heart.

The end of the second page and the third page states the famous historical fact. In an elevated and perfectly literary style it says " I didn't seek positions in the court of rivalling princes but survived the turbulent era in the farmland of Nang Yang. I led a simple life. The late Emperor did not consider me as a lowly man. He condescended to come over to my thatched hut three times and asked my opinion about the prevailing situation. That touched my heart. I de-

cided to allow the late Emperor to drive me like a cart horse. ”

“ I assumed the responsibility when we are defeated and at the nadir of our endeavours. Twenty one years passed since then. And when the late Emperor died he knew that I am a modest man. Therefore he entrusted me with the entire State Affairs. Since then I have had sleepless nights fearing that I may not be able to fulfill this mission. Therefore I crossed the Southern river and entered deeply into the barbarians land. Now the Southern frontier is safe and we have sufficient armour and soldiers. ”

Here the “ Southern expedition ” is assumed to be the first encounter between the Chinese and the Thai. *THE HISTORY OF SIAM* written by **W.A.R. Wood** begins with an illustration in which the Thai prince is surrendering to Chu Ke Liang.

From this point Chu Ke Liang expresses his determination and optimism about the future obviously to encourage the young Emperor.

He concludes his letter by saying : “ closely following the will of the late Emperor, I am deeply moved. I cannot say any more because I cry, now that I have to bid farewell to your Majesty. ”

This is a famous letter about which a Chinese said : “ One who does not cry reading this letter is inhuman. ”

The Second Letter

Now, we come to the second letter. Obviously, the situation has changed between the two letters. Chu Ke Liang’s campaigns have not been always successful. The resources of the

small empire of Shu are being depleted. People don’t see any realistic possibility of recovering the great Han dynasty. Even in the Shu court there is opposition against further campaigns. Therefore, the second letter has to take the form of a refutation of anti - campaign arguments. This letter begins with “ the late Emperor believed that the Han dynasty and the usurpers regime cannot co - exist. ” This was a favourite quote of the late Chiang Kai Shek who stubbornly rejected any dealing with communist China or the idea of two Chinas. The letter refutes six arguments against the campaign, but actually what it says consists of only one, namely, that time is running out and we have to stake our mission whether we succeed or not. He argued that : When the first Emperor of the Han dynasty unified the country, the first Emperor was incomparably greater than your Majesty and his advisers were much greater than Chu Ke Liang, but still he risked his life in many perils. We cannot expect to achieve our mission without risk : Tsao Tsao is a genius of the war, according to the assessment of the late Emperor, yet he had experienced so many defeats before achieving his own empire : Shu is a small empire. What we have is the remains of forces loyal to the Han dynasty but they are wearing down as time passes, if we remain inactive we will lose our chance, etc. ”

He concluded his letters by saying that the future is unpredictable. “ It is beyond my capability to predict whether our endeavour will succeed. Yet I am determined to continue and I will stop only when I die. ”