



The Beauty, the Beast and the Red Hare. The 'Chain Scheme' in Chinese Literature and Cinematography. Part 1

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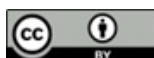
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Abstract

The Chinese historical chronicle “The Annals of the Three kingdoms” relates the last years of Han dynasty before the country fell into chaos. According to the Chronicle, a frontier general Dong Zhuo marched with his troops to the capital and took control over the boy emperor. He wanted to get rid of his rival general Ding Yuan, so he bribed his officers with gifts and promises. A young junior officer Lü Bu killed general Ding and presented his head to Dong Zhuo. The daring and unscrupulous officer enjoyed the favours of the usurper, he became his adopted son and was placed at the head of cavalry. To his misfortune, Dong Zhuo’s uncontrolled temper threatened the very life of his closest henchmen. Besides, Lü Bu’s regiments didn’t enjoy benefits they expected and that annoyed the soldiers and their new commander. Finally, Lü Bu started a secret affair with a court lady and was afraid to be exposed. So, when minister Wang Yun asked him to kill the tyrant, Lü Bu agreed. Following Wang Yun’s plan, he killed Dong Zhuo with his own hands. This story was masterfully re-worked in Luo Guangzhong’s great epic “The Three Kingdoms”. The writer dramatized the plot and turned the nameless court lady into a renowned beauty Diao Chan who plays the key role in the conspiracy. According to the novel, Diao Chan seduced Lü Bu and later married Dong Zhuo to set the tyrant and his powerful bodyguard against each other. This scheme was called “The Chain Scheme”, for the idea was to break the chain between the male characters with the help of female charms. The Chain Scheme is the most stylistically strong and textually rich episode; in the course of Chinese history it served as a plot to masterful works of fiction and in 20th-21st centuries got numerous TV adaptations. In the present paper I analyse artistic devices and narrative tropes in literature versions of Chain Scheme plot, paying attention to the visual images of the characters, especially their bodily representations as well as the psychological interpretations of their actions. In the Part II of the work I hope to do the same for the screen versions of the Chain Scheme story.

Keywords

China; “Three Kingdoms”; “The Chain Scheme”; Literary and Cinematographic Image; Lü Bu; Diao Chan; Dong Zhuo; Wang Yun; Yuan Drama; Tang Poetry; Chinese Historical Chronicles; Body; Bodily Visualization



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Кондотьер, Красавица и Красный Заяц. «План цепи» в китайской литературе и кинематографе. Часть 1

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Аннотация

В китайской исторической хронике «Анналы Троецарствия» рассказывается о последних годах правления династии Хань перед тем, как страна погрузилась в хаос. Согласно хронике, пограничный генерал Дун Чжо пришел со своими войсками в столицу и захватил мальчика-императора в свои руки. Желая избавиться от соперника, генерала Дин Юаня, он подкупил его офицеров подарками и посулами. Молодой офицер Люй Бу убил генерала Дина и преподнес его голову Дун Чжо. Дерзкий и беспринципный офицер попал в милость у узурпатора, он стал его приемным сыном и был поставлен во главе кавалерии. На его несчастье, бурный темперамент правителя Дун Чжо угрожал жизни его ближайших приспешников. Кроме того, армия, которую возглавил Люй Бу, так и не получила ожидаемых выгод, что раздражало солдат и их нового командира. Наконец, Люй Бу завел тайную интрижку с одной из придворных дам и боялся разоблачения. Поэтому, когда министр Ван Юнь предложил ему убить тирана, Люй Бу согласился. Следуя плану Ван Юня, он собственными руками убил Дун Чжо. Эта история была мастерски переработана в великой эпопее Ло Гуаньчжуна «Троецарствие». Писатель драматизировал сюжет и превратил безымянную придворную даму в известную красавицу Дяо Чань, которая играет ключевую роль в заговоре. Согласно роману, Дяо Чань соблазнила Люй Бу, а затем вышла замуж за Дун Чжо, чтобы натравить друг на друга тирана и его могучего телохранителя. Эта схема получила название «План цепи», поскольку идея заключалась в том, чтобы разорвать цепь между мужскими персонажами с помощью женских чар. «План цепи» – самый стилистически сильный и текстуально насыщенный эпизод, в ходе китайской истории он послужил сюжетом для ряда интересных художественных произведений, а в XX–XXI веках получил многочисленные телевизионные адаптации. В настоящей работе я анализирую художественные приемы и повествовательные тропы в литературных версиях фабулы, уделяя внимание визуальным образам персонажей, особенно их телесным репрезентациям, а также психологическим интерпретациям их действий. Во второй части работы я надеюсь сделать то же самое для экранизаций сюжета «План цепи».

Ключевые слова

Китай; «Троецарствие»; «План цепи»; литературный и кинематографический образ; Люй Бу; Дяо Чань; Дун Чжо; Ван Юнь; юаньская драма; танская поэзия; китайские исторические хроники; тело; телесная визуализация



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Introduction. The Chain Scheme in Chinese history, literature and cinema

Dating back to the third century AD, the Chinese historical chronicle “The Annals of the Three kingdoms” (三国志) relates the last years of Han dynasty (around 180-225 AD) before the country was divided into three rivaling kingdoms and fell into the chaos of warlordism. The usurper Dong Zhuo (董卓), a frontier general who marched into the capital with his army and forcefully established himself as Chancellor, wanted to get rid of his rival Ding Yuan, also a frontier general, and tried to bribe Ding’s officers with gifts and promises. They lent a favouring ear, but no one dared to take direct actions against their senior commander. No one, except a young junior officer Lü Bu (吕布), who killed Ding with his own hands and presented his head to Dong Zhuo.

From that moment on the daring and unscrupulous Lü Bu rose to power and enjoyed favours of the usurper. He was placed at the head of cavalry and was entrusted with the task of bodyguarding Dong Zhuo. He was able, strong and fearless and his position seemed invulnerable. Until it wasn’t, for Dong Zhuo’s uncontrolled temper sometimes threatened the very life of his closest henchmen. Besides, according to a modern Chinese historian, the army which Lü Bu was heading, didn’t enjoy benefits they expected to get and that hurt their feelings and annoyed their new commander¹. Finally, the chronicle tells, Lü Bu started a secret affair with one of the court ladies and was afraid that the envious Dong Zhuo (who apparently considered the emperor’s harem to be his own private hunting ground) would find out and destroy him. So, when one of the imperial ministers, Wang Yun (王允), who was long plotting to overthrow the usurper, approached Lü Bu and asked him save the country by killing the tyrant, Lü Bu agreed. He took an active part in the conspiracy and following Wang Yun’s scheme killed Dong Zhuo with his own hands.

This story was masterfully re-worked in the great novel by Luo Guangzhong (罗贯中) “The Romance of Three Kingdoms” (三国演义). The writer made the story even more dramatic and turned the nameless court lady with whom Lü Bu had an affair into a renowned beauty Diao Chan (貂蝉), who in the novel plays the key role in the conspiracy. According to the new version of the story, Diao Chan was an adopted daughter of the minister Wang Yun and willingly participated in the scheme to overthrow the tyrant. She seduced Lü Bu and later married Dong Zhuo to set the tyrant and his powerful henchman against each other. This scheme got the name “The Chain Scheme”, for the idea was to break the chain between the male characters with the help of female charms.

The Chain Scheme is the most stylistically strong and textually rich episode of Luo Guangzhong’s novel and as such it got numerous TV adaptations, with Lü Bu, Diao Chan, Dong Zhuo and Wang Yun being central or peripheral characters.

¹ This author, one of the best modern Chinese historians of the Three Kingdoms period, writes under the pseudonym The Governor of the South Gates (南门太守), his real name remains a mystery.



In the present paper I analyse artistic devices and narrative tropes that can be found in numerous cinema and TV adaptations of “Three Kingdoms”, trace the changes that the Chain Scheme episode has undergone in the course of history and especially in modern TV-dramas and make some conclusions as to the clash of traditional and new value systems of the modern Chinese people.

Lǚ Bu the historical person



Pic. 1. A modern Chinese illustration to the Three Kingdoms corpus. Lü Bu. On this picture we can see traditional elements of Lü Bu's iconography: his Painted Piercing-Sky Halberd, his golden belt with a lion face, his headgear with pheasant feathers. The picture serves as a theme for an Oppo cellphone.

The emergence of figures like Lü Bu and Dong Zhuo – the fighting mercenaries and *condottiers* – on political scene of later Han period is very well explained by the renowned sinologist and translator Rafe de Crespigny. This is how he sets



the background of the narration: “The Chinese armies in the north and west had become steadily more alienated from the central government. The constant warfare, raiding and internal disturbance had driven much of the civilian population away to the south, so that the soldiers – many of whom long in service – were left largely self-sufficient in a world of their own. As officials, eunuchs and imperial relatives by marriage competed for power, they paid small attention to the concerns of the frontier, while the troops who were stationed there gave loyalty rather to their comrades and their commanders than to an irrelevant imperial government” (De Crespigny, 2020, p. Xxiii).

There’s no lack of historical data about the main characters of the discussed story (the minister Wang Yun, the usurper Dong Zhuo and the belligerent adventurer Lü Bu). The acclaimed official history of the Later Han and Three Kingdoms period, “The Annals of the Three Kingdoms” written in the years 280-290 AD by Chen Shou, was compiled quite close to the described times. Unlike many traditional chronicles, “The Annals of the Three Kingdoms” provides alternative versions of events and a wealth of detail and opinion. Endorsed by imperial authority, the transmission of the text is quite reliable, and the quantity of material concerning the chief personages allows to speak about their life events with a more or less certainty (De Crespigny, 2010, p.1). Chen Shou devotes separate chapters to Dong Zhuo, whom he describes as a bloodthirsty tyrant, Wang Yun, an intrigant and a dexterous courtier, and Lü Bu, whom he characterizes as “*frivolous, deceitful, volatile, with only profit in mind*” (Chen, 1999, p.401). Yet Chen Shou admires Lü Bu’s warring skills and “*courage of a roaring lion*”, and mentions some of the good things he had done, like showing mercy to the family of his enemy. There’s no such character as Diao Chan in the chronicle, nothing more than a nameless court lady, whose affair with Lü Bu was one of the reasons of the usurper’s downfall.

Around the year 429 Pei Songzhi (裴松之) attached his own commentaries to Chen Shou’s “Annals” containing parallel accounts, some of them compiled by direct contemporaries. In this work, known as “The Commentary to Three Kingdoms” (三国志注) the author treats Lü Bu’s character with more aversion, darkening the image and emphasizing his disloyalty and insidiousness. In the years 432-435 AD Fan Ye (范晔) wrote “The Book of the Later Han” (“后汉书”), a very influential work for the historical evaluation of Three Kingdom personages (Fan, 2018). Fan Ye stresses negative features in the image of Lü Bu, makes him more crude, mean and unpleasant. His chronicle played a decisive role in shaping the image of Lu Bu in the eyes of historians and literati: the portrayal of Lü Bu in later history books was basically modeled on the “The Book of Later Han”. Thus, a historical compendium by the outstanding Chinese historian of the 10th century Sima Guang (司马光) “The Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid in Government” follows Fan Ye in the treatment of Lü Bu.

To illustrate the nature of the changes, one can look, for instance, at the way the characters’ words and relations are rendered. Whereas relations between Lü Bu



and his new master Dong Zhuo are described by the earliest source as “Dong Zhuo promised to treat Lü Bu as kindly as a father treats his son” (Chen, 1999 p. 412), the later chronicles state that Dong Zhuo actually adopted Lü Bu, thus making the rebellious warrior even meaner, his treason and murder of Dong Zhuo – a horrible act of patricide. Later in the works of fiction his first patron, Ding Yuan, whom Lü Bu killed at the incitement of the usurper, would also be turned into his adoptive father, making the double murder even more horrendous as double patricide (while in all probability, none of the assassinated warlords actually adopted Lü Bu). The reason for this murder which is described vaguely in the historical chronicles (“Dong Zhuo bribed Lü Bu to kill Ding Yuan” or even “Dong Zhuo persuaded Lü Bu to kill Ding Yuan”) will be added or rather simply invented in later historical essays and works of fiction, varying from “I killed my lord Ding Yuan because he constantly humiliated me” (Zhong, 1989 p. 387) as in anonymous “*Pinghua on Three Kingdoms*” to “Lü Bu killed his father bribed by a gift of a horse” (Luo, 2020, p. 115).

We can see that before poets, playwrights and novelists started to use Lü Bu's eventful life story in their works of fiction, his image had been consistently dramatized in historical chronicles. Departing from the original image of an ordinary frontier adventurer, unencumbered by conscience and morality, who sold his sword to the first bidder, the historians painted him with blacker and blacker brushstrokes as a villain, a traitor, and a patricide, and contrasted him with positive characters. This is logical – Chinese historical chronicles were never written simply to record events: the reader always had to learn a moral lesson from the story, so that it would help them find their bearings in real life.

Lü Bu the fictional character

In the course of thousands years-long Chinese history the image of Lü Bu was presented in different ways by historians and literati, with most of the scholar-officials using his image as a negative example for future generations. This is also the case in poetry and popular literature, but the difference is that the authors of various genres alter or create the details of his biography according to their personal needs or the demands of the times (Tang, 2018). On the level of historical biography, the image of Lü Bu is relatively fixed, while his image in poetry, opera, and prosaic novels varies.

For a few centuries Lü Bu's story didn't attract much attention of the men of letters. He was remembered though as a master archer and a “flying general” (“flying” in a sense of “a remarkable horseman able to cover great distances in a short time”). As a Chinese scholar Tang Lianping puts it, “Because of the difference in social style between the Tang and Song dynasties, the image of Lü Bu received very different evaluations in Chinese poetry” (Tang, 2018, p. 12).



**Pic. 2. Cosplay: an image of Lü Bu in a traditional attire.
Origin: the courtesy of the author's student**

During the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD), the time of unprecedented flowering of Chinese culture, there was a social demand for free self-expression, when personal talent and the overall informality of the individual were valued above all. In those times the memories of a general from the distant past took the form of praise of his military achievement rather than condemnation of his moral flaws. The poet Zhang Huaiguan (张怀瓘) compares in his ode a brush of a calligrapher with Lü Bu riding a horse:

“The spontaneity of the calligrapher is impressive. He has not yet refined his art, but is so spontaneous, like the flying general Lü Bu, light on his way to the top”¹ (Zhang, 1986, p. 236).

The poet Li He (李贺) devotes a few poems to Lü Bu, the most complimentary of which being “The Horse”:

1 All verses and prosaic extracts are cited in my own translation. E.S.



赤兔无人用, The horse Red Hare would let no rider on his back
当须吕布骑。 Until it's saddled by Lü Bu.
吾闻果下马, I heard that once he stepped down from the horseback,
羁策任蛮儿. He would defeat any barbarian (Li, 1977, p. 102).

Another of Li He's poems called "The Song about general Lü" is written as a praise to his friend, a military commander who happened to have the same surname as Lü Bu. The poet compares his friend with Lü Bu riding his famous horse Red Hare (Li, 1977, p. 107).

Wang Qi (王起) devotes a poem to the episode in the life of Lü Bu when he shot an arrow at an unbelievably far distance and hit a peculiar target – he sent his arrow through a tiny hole in the hilt of his halberd. Lü Bu did this in order to help his ally who was challenged to war by an outnumbering enemy. As an arbiter between the two warring parties, Lü Bu offered this sort of martial competition instead of a real battle, and his success meant that both parties should call a truce. This historical fact was one of Lü Bu's most famous achievements, admired by contemporaries and descendants. Wang Qi thus summarizes this feat:

矫矫吕公, How amazing is Lord Lü,
凛千载之英风。 Such a hero is born once in a thousand years!
立辕门而耀武, He stood at the gates showing his martial skills,
百夫之特; Such as he is one in a hundred men.
射戟枝而骋技, He shot at the halberd and galloped his horse,
一矢称雄。 He was called a real hero.
所以解纷为智, This is why it is wise to resolve disputes in a peaceful way,
和难成功 To succeed in reconciling difficulties (Dong, 1983, p. 6492).

During the Song dynasty (960-1279 AD), the period of the formation of Neo-Confucianism with its stern rigorism and emphasis on moral imperatives, poetry and prose were universally critical of Lü Bu, emphasizing his treachery, infidelity and lust for profit. One of the greatest Chinese poets of all times, the famous Su Dongpo (Su Shi 苏轼) mentions Lü Bu in at least five of his poems. In beautiful lines, eloquent in their simplicity, Su Dongpo compares his own predicaments – falling in the hands of his political opponents – with that of Lü Bu, captured and executed by his opponent Cao Cao:

而今太守老且寒, And now I am old and cold
侠气不洗儒生酸。 And my chivalry spirit does not wash the sourness of Confucianism
犹胜白门穷吕布, Yet I will do better than the poor Lü Bu at the White Gates
欲将鞍马事曹瞒 Who was prepared to serve Cao Cao with his saddle and horse (Su, 1982, p. 843).



The poet refers to his own story – he opposed Minister Wang Anshi's land reforms and was exiled to a distant province. But unlike Lü Bu, who was captured alive by his enemy Cao Cao and begged for mercy in his despair, the poet would not compromise and wouldn't serve his enemy. The pitying contempt the poet expresses for the hero is contrasted by his own dignified moral position. The poet also mentions Lü Bu as a talented but disloyal villain who betrayed his master in the poems "Dong Zhuo" and "A Letter to the Emperor about Xuzhou city". Another Song Dynasty poet, Qin Guan (秦观), joins in this negative characteristics of Lü Bu: "(Lü) Bu was not loyal to Ding and Dong, but he was willing to be loyal to Cao Cao?!" (Dong, 1983, p. 484). The poet depicts Lü Bu as a ruthless and unrighteous villain, unable to be loyal to Ding Yuan and Dong Zhuo, so his intention to serve under Cao Cao is but a guile to save his worthless life.

The story of Lü Bu was popularized during the hundred years of Yuan dynasty reign (1271-1368), when the power in the empire fell in the hands of Mongolian invaders. Chinese intellectuals, ousted from power and deprived of the opportunity to hold public office, were completely immersed in the world of literature. But even this world was almost closed to them because of the censorship imposed by the Mongolian occupants, and the only loophole where they could apply their literary talent was in the theatre. The Yuan dynasty was a time of unprecedented flowering of the theatrical arts, for it was during this period that the best minds in China began to compose plays for the theatre. But the art of theatre is all about meeting the expectations of the theatre-going public, and the Yuan period spectators wanted thrilling narrations about brave heroes and charming maidens. Right then Lü Bu's story came handy: when properly exploited, his image contained what the spectators wanted to see – both feats of courage and a love legend. The image of Lü Bu started to be changed and developed accordingly.



Pic. 3. Lü Bu as depicted in modern art. The picture serves as a theme for an Oppo cellphone.

The total number of plays in which Lü Bu is the main character is eight, second only to the most popular Three Kingdoms characters Zhang Fei and Guan Yü. Those plays are:

- 1) “Three heroes fight against Lü Bu at Hujiuguan” (虎牢关三战吕布) by the playwright Zheng Guangzu (郑光祖) and seven more plays by anonymous authors:
- 2) “Jin Yuntang secretly sets the Chain Scheme” (锦云堂暗定连环计),
- 3) “Three heroes fight against Lü Bu” (张翼德单战吕布),
- 4) “Three heroes leave Xiaopi” (张翼德三出小沛),
- 5) “Lü Bu, sighing, calls himself a hero” (吕布自叹英雄),
- 6) “Diao Chan meets Lü Bu” (貂蝉见吕布),
- 7) “Flower candle in the bridal bedroom” (花烛洞房)¹ and

¹ Which metaphorically means simply “having sex”



8) “The beauty Diao Chan” (貂蝉女).

It's noteworthy that meeting the demands of the times, the theatrical image of Lü Bu changed from a crude and ruthless swordsman to a person versed both in literature and art of war. Thus, in the play “Chain Scheme” the minister Wang Yun reflects how difficult it would be to set a trap for Lü Bu: “*The wise and brave Marquis Lü is already too powerful. Lü Bu is also a master of both civil and martial arts, so it is difficult to figure him out*”. In other plays the hero claims that he “*learned literature when he was young and grew up in mastering martial arts*”; “*learned literature and martial arts at an early age*”; “*versed in three strategies of martial arts and six compendiums of classical books*” etc. (Tang, 2018, pp. 28-31).

In all the Yuan dramas Lü Bu is depicted as a romantic lover who harbors deep and genuine feelings for Diao Chan. The latter is more often his wedded wife than merely a love interest. From a fornicator of the chronicles, Lü Bu has progressed to a devoted husband who kills Dong Zhuo for raping his spouse. Diao Chan is shown a loving wife who was separated from her husband by the casualty of civil war. The core of the plot is a young couple in the predicament of their separation being taken advantage of and manipulated by politicians.

The earlier edition of Luo Guangzhong's famous novel “The Romance of the Three Kingdoms” was written around the beginning of the Ming Dynasty. This edition is called Jijiang version (嘉靖壬午本), because it was first published in Jijiang. The author revives the image of Lü Bu the traitor who killed both of his adopted fathers merely to get a good horse or a beautiful lady. He is brave but stupid, doesn't trust his faithful advisors and is not trustworthy himself. His shameful death at the hands of Cao Cao is a proper reward for his lifelong infidelity and bad choices. Still the original version has many complimentary lines on Lü Bu's appearance and martial prowess. Now and again the observers who watch him galloping to battle would think that Lü Bu “looks like a god”:

“Dong Zhuo saw Lü Bu on horseback, holding the painted Piercing-Sky halberd, galloping to and fro, looking like a god” (Luo, 1980, p. 33);

“Cao Cao saw that Lü Bu looked like a god, his horse was like a lion, and the soldiers on his left and right were powerful and strong” (Luo, 1980, p. 115);

“He saw Lü Bu riding out of formation, bow and arrows on his body, holding the painted Piercing-Sky halberd, riding the horse Red Hare. One can really say “Among the man who but Lü Bu, among the horses who but Red Hare”! Among the people and horses, these two were really the best at the end of the Han Dynasty” (Luo, 1980, p. 146).



Pic. 4. Lü Bu a doll as displayed in Taobao Internet market. Origin: Taobao display
<http://games.sina.cn/gz/jx3/2018-02-01/details-ifyremfz3149994.d.html>

All of these “looking like a god” lines were completely wiped out of the new, Qing Dynasty edition by the father and son publishers Mao Lun (毛纶) and Mao Zonggang (毛宗岗), whose edition became a widely accepted canon and is used as almost the only reprinted version up to now. In their campaign to accent the good and point at the evil, the publishers changed and abridged the text, omitted the whole passages or rewrote them to emphasize what they thought proper. Even the face of the hero underwent changes: when Lü Bu makes the first appearance, Jijiang edition says that “his eyes and eyebrows were clear” (“clear” being a synonym in Chinese literature for fair and beautiful) (Luo, 1980, p. 31); the Maos change it to “with an imposing appearance and angry eyes” (Luo, 2020, p. 46).

Otherwise, when Lü Bu is supposed to do or say something noble, the Mao’s revised edition downplays it. Once Lü Bu waged war against another warlord, Liu Bei, who used to show him kindness. When in the course of this war Lü Bu captured his rival’s wife and family members, he didn’t make hostage out of them, nor gave them to their soldiers and officers, as was the custom of the time – he treated them with respect and sent them back to Liu Bei. When his offices



advised him to kill the women, he replied, according to earlier records: “Liu Bei is my sworn brother, how can I bear to harm his family?”. The early edition goes on with: “This was how Lü Bu showed his brotherly feelings” (Luo, 1980, p. 231). In revised edition Lü Bu simply says: “Myself and Liu Bei are old acquaintances”. The phrase about brotherly feelings is turned into its opposite: “This was not because Lü Bu had feelings ... (Luo, 2020, p. 259). The character in Luo Guangzhong’s original version has some redeemable features, he is at least capable of mercy. In Mao’s revised edition he is a cold brute.

Apart from Lü Bu, the images of other figures of the story were more or less fixed throughout centuries: the minister Wang Yuan is loyal to the throne and tirelessly seeks for the way to bring down the usurper, the self-proclaimed Chancellor Dong Zhuo is a gruesome inhuman brute who revels in tortures, lust and even cannibalism. As for the female character, for a long time she remained but a shadow on the background.

“The Chain Scheme” plot: development and changes in medieval literary works



**Pic. 5. Lü Bu fights against three warriors. A traditional image engraved on porcelain.
Origin: shot by the author of the article.**



The Beauty

The Chinese name of the heroine is beautiful but strange; it consists of two incompatible words: Diao 貂 meaning a sable and Chan 蝉 – a cicada. Chinese parents almost never give their children such names (just putting two names of animals together), especially not in the later Han, when personal names either denoted simply the child's elderly (Brashier, 2014, p. 81) or rotated around the concept "virtue"¹. Some historians believe that this name was derived from an official rank of a court lady-at-attendance, who were probably wearing sable furs as insignia (Wang, 2005). Thus, a court rank of the heroine transferred in works of fiction into her personal name.

Diao Chan made her first appearance in the novel by an anonymous folk author "Pinghua² on Three Kingdoms" (三国志平话). This underrated work of fiction, written during the Yuan dynasty, is believed to be a predecessor and a direct source of Luo Guangzhong's renowned novel "Three Kingdoms". The author of the novel is very much interested in Lü Bu's adventures and tries to fill in gaps in his story. He makes his favourite character not an officer but a house slave to the general Ding Yuan, which explains why Lü Bu killed his master – he was being treated unfairly and constantly humiliated. After killing Ding Yuan, the hero jumps on his master's best horse, the one with red curly hair, and rides away with Ding Yuan's servants at pursuit. On the way they meet Dong Zhuo who watches how valiantly the slave fights against the pursuers. He stops the fight, grants Lü Bu pardon and accepts him as his adopted son. The thankful Lü Bu fights in many battles for his new lord, inflicting panic terror on all his enemies, while the loyal minister Wang Yun wracks his brains how to oppose Dong Zhuo's growing power.

One day he spots his maid servant burning incense and praying in the garden. He asks the girl what is the reason of this and she relates how looking down from the window she saw her long-lost husband riding a horse along the street, so now she prays for the family reunion:

"She hastily kneeled down and said: "My surname is Ren, my name is Diao Chan, my husband's name is Lü Bu. I haven't seen him since we lost each other in Lintao, that's why I have been burning this incense and praying for reunion" (Zhong, 1989, p. 391).

At this very moment a new plan occurred to Wang Yun: he decided to break the father-son relations between the usurper and his bodyguard with the help of a "Chain Scheme". In this version the core of the plan was not the remarkable beauty of Diao Chan – her appearance was essentially not important – but the fact that he accidentally got hold of Lü Bu's wife. Diao Chan didn't have to seduce anyone; it was enough just to invite Lü Bu to the house and watch the couple meet each other:

"Wang Yuan thought: "Heaven helps the Han dynasty" The minister said again: "I didn't know she was the wife of Marquis Wen, such a happy coincidence, what is better than

1 Thus, Lü Bu was our hero's official name, while his personal name was Fengxian 奉先, which means "ancestor worship".

2 Pinghua or Plain Talk (平话) is a genre of Chinese literature, a folk novel written in a simple, available to the public language.



the reunion of husband and wife!" He also said: "I regard her my own daughter. I will choose an auspicious day, a good time, and send Diao Chan to the Chancellor's house to finish the reunion with Marquis Wen." Lü Bu was very happy and bid farewell" (Zhong, 1989, p. 391).

Here two things are important. Wang Yun purposefully doesn't give the wife to her husband immediately. He stresses that Diao Chan is like a daughter to him, and as such she is entitled to some formal ceremony – a fortunate day, a red palanquin etc. Lü Bu lives together with his adopted father, so the adaptation in the folk novel is not a formality, but a real family arrangement. Wang Yun sends the girl not to Lü Bu's house (he doesn't seem to have one) but to Dong Zhuo's place. Yet the cunning minister doesn't inform the Chancellor that the girl is going to be his daughter-in-law, so the lustful tyrant immediately drags her to his bed. What happens later is predictable and doesn't necessitate Wang Yun's further activities:

"Lü Bu heard loud and clear music in the house, so he asked around what was going on. Everyone said, 'The Chancellor is with a woman named Diao Chan. Lu Bu was shocked and walked to the end of the corridor. Suddenly he saw Diao Chan going out undressed. Lü Bu was furious: 'Where is the villain? Diao Chan said, 'Drunk' Lü Bu brought his sword into the hall. Seeing Dong Zhuo's nosing like thunder, lying like a meat mountain, he scolded: 'The old thief has gone too far!' 'A sword broke his neck, and blood flowed. Dong Zhuo was stabbed to death" (Zhong, 1989, p. 392).

The plot thickens

The Yuan dynasty dramas follow the same plot, underlying this or that aspect of the story: Wang Yun's plan becomes more detailed, the couple's marital life after the death of Dong Zhuo is elaborated upon. The deep love between the young people is described in more colours. This is how in the play "Chain Scheme" Diao Chan expresses her longing for Lü Bu and her worry that she is no match for him in his new exalted position:

"My life is thin; my tears are dark. My lonely path without him is a mistake. I am ashamed of my poor clothes and my plain face, and though I long to see Marquis of Wen, how do I dare meet him now?" (Zhong, 1989, p. 408).

Yet in Yuan dramas the Chain Scheme remains one man's making with Lü Bu and Diao Chan both being the cunning minister's puppets, and the assassination of Dong Zhuo a spontaneous act of rage. From the narrative perspective, the plot was good and solid, but it was not yet good enough. Nevertheless, it became popular and beloved; being the only love story in Three Kingdoms cycle, it added a romantic relief to a bloody war drama.



Pic. 6. Cosplay: an image of Lü Bu in a traditional attire.
Origin: courtesy of the author's student

The Chain Scheme was finally crystallized under the brush of the great Chinese historian-novelist Luo Guangzhong in his novel “The Romance of Three Kingdoms”. The author masterfully uses elements and components from various sources, combining them into a coherent and compelling narration with a strong plot.

In the novel, the Chain Scheme takes its classic form, known since childhood to every Chinese: Minister Wang Yun tries different ways to put an end to the usurper, but they all end in failure. Pondering the sad fate of his homeland, he stays up at night and hears the sound of music from the garden. In the garden he sees his adopted daughter, Diao Chan, playing the zither and sighing bitterly. The minister is angry, thinking that the girl is engaged in some love affair, but her answer stuns him: it turns out that the daughter is also concerned about the fate of her homeland, and even more concerned about the sadness of her foster father. The minister takes his daughter to the inner rooms and suddenly falls on his knees before her: “You alone can save the Han dynasty!”



Then he tells her that no assassin can get near the tyrant because he is guarded by the mighty Lü Bu. But were they able to turn the very Lü Bu against the tyrant, the fatherland would be saved from unbearable oppression. In order to do that, he brings forward the Chain Scheme: to split the chain between two men by making them both lust after the same woman. She readily agrees to act as a seductress and pit the villains against each other. To do this, with Diao Chan's knowledge and consent, Wang Yun sends expensive gifts to Lü Bu. When he arrives at the minister's manor to thank him for the gifts in accordance with etiquette, Wang Yun invites him to dinner and orders Diao Chang to come and pour the wine. Lü Bu is struck by the beauty of the girl, and throughout the meal he can think and talk only about her. Wang Yun pretends to be tipsy and disregards the coquetry and liberties of the young people – so he lures Lü Bu deeper into his trap. Finally, seeing that the victim is deeply hooked, he suddenly offers to marry his daughter to Lü Bu.

Lü Bu is both delighted and surprised by the offer: despite his special position under the usurper, he is still a low-born field commander, whereas Wang Yun is one of the highest state officials. But Wang Yun convinces the warrior that he himself is childless, Diao Chang, though an adopted daughter, is the only family member, and he wants to marry her off to a man whom he can later fully entrust the welfare of the family. Lü Bu bows to the ground before him and swears fidelity, the engagement is concluded and the minister promises to send his daughter to Lü Bu's house on a favourable day according to astrological predictions (Here we should keep in mind that Lü Bu is already married, he takes Diao Chan as his second wife, and in this sort of marriage no wedding rites are carried out, the bride is simply sent in a palanquin to the groom's house).

While Lü Bu waits for an auspicious day, the minister invites the usurper to his manor for dinner. He agrees to come and is also shown Diao Chan. The beauty dances in front of the guest and pours him wine. Just like Lü Bu, Dong Zhuo is struck by her beauty and art, and Wang Yun presents him with the girl as a gift without further delay. Delighted, the usurper takes her back to his place and indulges with her in the pleasures of the matrimonial bedroom. The beautiful girl is flirtatious and charming, and very quickly she becomes Dong Zhuo's favourite and he is ready to fulfil her every wish.



Pic. 7. Lü Bu as envisaged in a computer game. The picture on an Oppo cellphone case. Here the nakedness of the hero renders his superhuman strength, his dangerous temperament and marvelous martial skills. Origin: shot by the author of the article.

After learning that his fiancée is in the hands of Dong Zhuo, the enraged Lü Bu bursts into the minister's house ready to cause a scandal. But the minister calms him down by saying that the Chancellor took the girl from his house not for himself but for him, Lü Bu, to arrange a grand wedding for his adopted son. Lü Bu waits a little longer and, tired of waiting, arrives at the usurper's house. There he is introduced to Diao Chan as his adoptive father's new wife. Diao Chan manages to play on two fronts: with the usurper she flirts and pretends to be loving and happy, while with Liu Bu she weeps and plays the victim of violence.

The saddened Lü Bu seeks a meeting with his beloved and he manages to arrange a secret rendezvous in the usurper's garden while Dong Zhuo is elsewhere. Diao Chan rebukes him with bitter words: Lü Bu, a glorified hero, can't protect his woman from the shame and violence! Then she even attempts to kill himself. Lü Bu persuades her to be patient a little longer and promises that he will find a way to save her – though he doesn't know how, for at the time he is not yet ready to betray his father. Dong Zhuo himself gives him an impetus though – he returns home early to find his beloved in his son's arms, and in a fury, he attacks Lü Bu, throwing at him Lü Bu's own halberd. The warrior manages to dodge and flee, but he is enraged and shaken.



Minister Wang Yun meets with him and adds fuel to his anger. He talks about how cruel and ungrateful Duong Zhuo is for having molested his own son's bride and having attempted to kill him, what a shame the great hero has suffered, and so on. With such words he baits Lü Bu to the point where the latter vows to kill the tyrant. Seeing that the fruit is ripe, the minister brings up a decent basis for the assassination: if Lü Bu is ready to kill the tyrant, it must be done not for the sake of a girl, but to serve the emperor and the people. As for the father-son relationship, Lü Bu and Dong Zhuo have different surnames, which means that their relationship should not be considered a real kinship. Lü Bu discards any doubts and actively joins the conspiracy. Following Wang Yun's instructions, he lures Dong Zhuo into a trap and kills him with his own hands. This is the final, most elaborate literary variant of the Chain Scheme, the one that enjoyed tremendous popularity and served a plot for many regional Chinese operas and dramas throughout Ming and Qing dynasties up to modern times.

It is interesting how masterfully Luo Guanghong weaves elements from different sources into the fabric of his narrative, sometimes giving them new interpretations. For example, while in a Yuan drama Lü Bu bows low to the minister Wang to thank him for saving his wife, in the novel it turns into an overly hasty bow by the son-in-law to his father-in-law, securing the engagement. Lü Bu's promise to serve the minister "*as faithfully as a dog or a horse*" is transformed from a formula for sincere gratitude into an expression of impatient desire for the sex with a beautiful female. What was tragic becomes ridiculous.

The Red Hare

In modern iconography, Lü Bu is always portrayed riding a beautiful red stallion named Red Hare. According to the novel "The Three Kingdoms", the usurper Dong Zhuo used this horse to bring Lü Bu to his side. He gave the opportunistic officer a horse as a present – not just any horse, but the best in the world, a thousand-miles-horse – and it was enough to make Lü Bu, a lover of women and horses, not only defect to Dong Zhuo, but kill his foster father with his own hands. The shame of this act followed Lü Bu throughout his life, and he forever had the reputation of having traded his father for a horse.

The admiration of this mighty animal is expressed in the saying "Lü Bu is the first among (warrior) men, Red Hare is the first among horses"¹. This saying one finds even in the Mao edition of "Three Kingdoms", where most of the favorable to Lü Bu passages and verses are dropped out. The horse was believed to not only be the fastest and strongest among battle stallions – he was devoted to his master, but the master he chose to serve was to be a hero. So the horse, according to the legend, agreed to carry only Lü Bu, and after his death he switched his loyalty to one more brave warrior, Guan Yü, a man who is up to now considered an epitome of faithfulness and rightfulness. A true heroic horse for a true hero, this Red Hare

1 人中吕布，马中赤兔



became an inseparable part of Lü Bu's visualization. But where does the horse come from? How does it become the hero's best companion, a continuation of his body – to the extent that in order to kill Lü Bu the enemies had first to separate him from his horse?



Pic. 8-9. A Japanese version of Lü Bu on a Japan-produced notebook imported to China. Traditional representation enforced by the tragic facial expression and the wounds on the failed hero's face. Origin: shot by the author of the article.

The original historical records and the works of the later historians know nothing about Lü Bu's horse. The sources do not specify with what gifts and promises Dong Zhuo bribed him to kill his former commander and join forces. The first mention of the horse is found in Yuan period dramas. In Zheng Guangzu's play "Three heroes fight against Lü Bu at Hujiuguan" Lü Bu says: "I had a gold pot in my hand, and I killed Ding Jianyang with this pot, then I mounted a curly-haired horse named Red Hare and rode away". Here the protagonist explains why and how he killed his lord and how he managed to escape thereafter: he didn't plan the murder, but angered by his lord, he struck him with a home utensil he had had in his hand, then ran out and mounted a good horse that allowed him to escape. But here we have the colour of the horses' hair: it is red and curly, and the name: Red Hare.

Later, in prosaic renderings of the plot, the story will take the following form:

"Dong Zhuo saw a man riding a horse, who was like a fierce tiger; the man scattered his soldiers killing as many as he could" (Tang, 2018, p. 24);



“They saw a man riding a horse, who was like a tiger. Dong Zhuo shouted and asked who was there. The man did not say anything. The people all shouted: ‘This man is Ding Jianyang’s family slave, who killed general Ding, and rode general Ding’s horse to escape’ (Zhong, 1989, p. 67).

So, the horse has gradually come to stay: now it is not only an instrument of the hero’s safe flight from danger, it already starts to be perceived as a part of him being *“like a fierce tiger”*: an invincible tiger-like warrior riding a mighty horse. Finally, under the magic brush of Luo Guangzhong – who was awesomely good at borrowing seemingly unconnected elements from different sources and weaving them into his own narration, so that they all become meaningful – the horse turns into an agent of its own. It is precisely to get this horse that Lü Bu betrays his former commander, riding this horse duplicates his strength, the loss of this horse precedes his death.



Pic. 10. Red Hare and his rider. The picture serves as a theme for an Oppo cellphone.

Yet the novel “Three Kingdoms” still treats Red Horse as a mere animal. Other people can steal it and lead it away, it can change riders, it doesn’t communicate with human characters. The modern interpretation, partly inspired, as I believe, by a formulaic image of a hero’s heroic horse from European and Chinese sources,



makes them an inseparable duo: the horse and his rider seem to be animated by each other, in love with each other, so that the killing of a foster father to acquire a horse seems though not pardonable, but at least understandable. The modern narrations have stitched Red Hare to Lü Bu so tightly, that one becomes an integral element of another. The horse is born so that the hero can ride him, he allows no one else to mount his back, the loss of the horse leads to the hero's perish and the loyal horse kills himself after the master's death.

In the second part of my work, I will show how this connection is shown and interpreted in numerous TV-adaptations of the Chain Scheme plot. And the following modern folklore story proves that the Chain Scheme with its characters is still a living flourishing topic of the modern Chinese culture:

"When the youngster Lü Bu left his parents' grave, he was unsure of what to do, so he came all the way to Huo village. The villagers were having a "sheep-scratching" competition, Lü Bu won the first prize and was taken in by the old man who was the head of Huo Village. The old man learned of the tragic death of Lü Bu's parents and persuaded him to stay in the village to teach the villagers some defensive skills. Later on, Lü Bu was inadvertently spotted by Ding Yuan, the governor of Bingzhou, who ordered him to join elite cavalry.

One night, Lü Bu saw in a dream an old immortal, who smilingly said, "Would you like to get a good horse?" The young man then asked, "Where do you come from, holy father? The old man smiled and said, "I am the god of the Seven Rock Mountains. I have seen you come here day after day to attend after the horses and your love for them has touched the gods. Although you are an excellent warrior, you have your Painted Piercing-Sky Halberd and a bow, but you need a dragon horse to ride."

Hearing this, Lü Bu smiled and asked, "Immortal, where can I find this precious horse?"

The old man laughed and said, "Come here tomorrow at noon to see it."

After that he suddenly disappeared and Lü Bu woke up and opened his eyes, only to realize that it was a dream.

The next day, Lü Bu mounted his white mare and rode alone to the edge of the pond, letting go of the reins and allowing the horse to stride leisurely. It was close to noon when a sudden gust of wind hit him and the white horse whinnied. A wonderful stallion with a body like fire with a tail sweeping the clouds was following them. Lü Bu had loved horses since he was a boy, so could he not know that this horse was the best in the world?" (You, 2014, pp. 30-31)

The story goes on with Lü Bu hiding among the rocks and letting his mare attract the wild stallion. After a few days he managed to capture the red horse and started an arduous fight to tame him. Finally, the animal gave up and allowed the young man to take care of itself. Lü Bu gave him water out of his own hands and washed him, with the white mare following at his heels. From now on the hero rode his Red Hare stallion, and when he met Diao Chan, the love of his life, he gave her the white mare. Since then, they were inseparable: two loving humans and two loving horses, four beautiful creatures. Together they lived and together they died.



The story finishes by contesting the assumption that after the hero's death Red Hare was given to Guan Yü: *"How could it be possible that such a horse would serve two masters?!"* (You, 2014, p. 32).

"The Chain Scheme" in the modern Chinese literature

After the publication of the hugely popular novel "The Three Kingdoms", the content of the plays about the hero Lü Bu and the beauty Diao Chan changed. The new, Ming and Qing period dramas narrated no longer about the martial exploits of Lü Bu or his relations with other warlords: Wang Yun's plan, i.e., the Chain Scheme proper became the core of the plot. Such dramas most often had the same title: "Lü Bu flirts with Diao Chan"¹, but differed in theatrical style, music, costumes and regional dialects. The title points at the culmination of the new dramas, the scene where Lü Bu first meets the girl, gets smitten with her beauty and starts flirting with her while her foster father pretends to look elsewhere. The scene is always a comic one, with the protagonist playing a love fool and the girl luring him in her trap with skillful coquetry.

After the troublesome times of XIX- XX century that brought to China colonial wars, civil wars, wars for independence and revolutions, the beginning of the new millennium with its prosperity and relative peace witnessed a renewed interest to the Chain Scheme story. As a result, a vast flow of low-quality novels appeared in the last decade to entertain the public. Among most recent works of fiction that tell the Chain Scheme story from the male perspective are:

- 1) "The Three Kingdoms of Lü Bu" by an author nicknamed Bewitching the World (2016);
- 2) My Father-in-Law is Lü Bu" by an author nicknamed Big Brother Has a Gun (2016);
- 3) "The New Biography of Lü Bu" by an author nicknamed No Tears in the Cold (2016);
- 4) "Possessing Lü Bu" by an author nicknamed A King but not a Hegemon, (2017);²
- 5) "Lü Bu, the Three Kingdoms' War God" by an author nicknamed Years Adrift (2017);
- 6) "The Strongest in All Realms" by an author nicknamed The Real Man of Evil (2018);
- 7) "The Rebirth of Lü Bu the God of War" by an author nicknamed Wandering Monkey, (2019);

1 "吕布戏貂蝉戏"

2 For the complete list of novels one can open <https://www.xiaoxi.com/search.php?s=&searchkey=%E5%90%95%E5%B8%83>



- 8) "Lü Bu has a Traversal Door" by an author nicknamed Smoke and Rain Weaving Melancholy (2019);
- 9) "Lü Bu, the Tyrant of the Three Kingdoms" by an author with a strange nick Water in the Fish (2019);
- 10) "The Mighty Warrior Lü Bu Sweeping a Thousand Armies" by an author nicknamed Tabooed Rock (2019);
- 11) "The Reincarnation of Lü Bu" by an author with a strange nick Back to the Precious Sword (2020);
- 12) "Lü Bu Could Not Have Been so Fierce" by an author nicknamed Family Brother (2021);
- 13) "Lü Bu's Best Strategy" by an author nicknamed The Apple of Sobriety (2022);
- 14) "Lü Bu Reborn: The Crumbling World of the Late Han" by an author nicknamed The Madman of Heaven (2022);
- 15) "The New Chronicles of Lü Bu's Battles" by an author nicknamed The Strongest of the Strong (2022) etc.



Pic.11. Lü Bu on an Oppo cellphone case. Origin: shot by the author of the article



The reader may be surprised that the authors of these works, without exception, all write under flamboyant pseudonyms, hiding their real names. Yet, this is typical for Chinese entertainment literature sold as electronic editions on commercial Internet websites.

From the female perspective the most recent novels would be:

- 1) “Three Kingdoms: since Diao Chan Ran Away from Wang Yun” by an author nicknamed Stray Dog (2021);
- 2) “Diao Chan” by Qiao Xi (Qiao, 2021);
- 3) “Diao Chan Who Was Beautiful Like a Precious Jade” by an anonymous author, (2021);
- 4) “Three Kingdoms: Diao Chan’s Choice” by an author nicknamed The Great Qin Dynasty at Night (2021);
- 5) “Crossing Three Kingdoms: Diao Chan” by an author nicknamed Antelope (2021) etc.etc.

All this entertaining literature has very little artistic merit and is essentially nothing more than a reading for passing the time. It is interesting only in that it reflects the Chinese people’s undiminished interest in the corpus of texts on the heroes of the Three Kingdoms and the Chain Scheme plot.

The novel “Cao Cao and Cai Wenji” (which was later scripted into a decent TV-drama with a deep psychological examination of characters) brings the story to a higher literary level. The novel written by an anonymous author, whose identity remains a secret during the latest decade, re-works the familiar chain of events into the following sequence: Diao Chan escapes from a penal colony where the prisoners and the members of their families toiled in hard labour. She is picked up by Wang Yuan and becomes his maid servant and a sex toy. Later, when Wang Yun begins to devise a plan to kill the usurper, he ponders how to use his beautiful maid. Wang Yun orders her to seduce Lü Bu and then pretends to catch the pair *in flagranti* and starts blackmailing his dangerous guest. Some clumsy love triangle scenes would follow – the husband, the wife and the lover – and finally Wang Yun, using a mixture of threats and sexual bait, wins Lü Bu over to his side and sets him against the tyrant. In terms of composition and artistic merits, these changes do not do much to improve the story, but rather trivialize it and make all the characters vulgar and pathetic. The only interesting thing here is that the modern author approaches the classic story of love, thoroughly reworking it to their own taste and to the taste of their intended readers.

The short story “Diao Chan” from the collection “5000 Years of Classical Folk Tale Heritage” slightly changes the motivation for the tyrant’s assassination. The anonymous author leaves the first part of the Chain Scheme plot unchanged, but moves the secret meetings of the lovers from Dong Zhuo’s private garden to a Buddhist temple (obviously not knowing that Buddhism was just beginning



to spread in China in the described period). After each clandestine date with Lü Bu, the heroine, true to her intention of pitting the tyrant and his bodyguard against each other, complains to Dong Zhuo that she was harassed –again! –by his foster son. The enraged tyrant beats the adulterer to a pulp with his own hands. But it is not resentment or his own humiliation that makes Lü Bu raise his hand against his foster father – he is afraid that Dong Zhuo would be just as cruel to the girl. “My body is made of steel,” he tells himself, “but I can barely move after this beating. What will he do to her, who is so weak and delicate?” To save his beloved from a beating, he kills Dong Zhuo, at which point the story abruptly ends. The author concludes with the remark that Diao Chan's fate is lost in the darkness of history: “Whether she has fled to a faraway land after completing her mission, has committed suicide or married Lü Bu, we don't know” (Xu, 2017, p.223). The story is written with a simple but elegant language without over-emotional exaggerations typical to modern Chinese prose. It has colours, it has details, it has its own logic (apart from the heroin's lonely visits to a faraway temple in the time when a decent female from a rich family would hardly leave the seclusion of her inner chambers). I simply like the story, partly because it gives fresh nuances to the plot, with heroine being active and initiative in her scheme, and the hero being comically gentlemanly. It's a step down from the perfection of Luo Guangzhong's Chain Scheme, but it's creative in its way.

Moving to a higher level literature, we have a writer Wang Fulin (王福林), the author of a few novels about modern urban and country life in China. He is an editor of a literary journal “Grassland”, a publishing author and a winner of a few literary awards. As Wang Fulin comes from a city in Inner Mongolia, which was Lü Bu's home place, he is naturally interested in the life of his famous fellow countryman. This interest made him publish not one, but three novels on this topic: “Young Lü Bu in Wuyuan” (Wang, 2021), “Lü Bu, the real person” and “Lü Bu” (Wang, 2022).

In Wang Fulin's most recent novel “Lü Bu” the Chain Scheme is not based on “Three Kingdoms” – the writer turns back to the Yuan dynasty folk novel “Pinghua on Three Kingdoms”, in which Dong Zhuo beds his son's spouse, and the latter, upon learning of this, kills him in a fit of rage. The modern writer allows the feelings to brew: in his version Lü Bu learns that his concubine (who isn't called Diao Chan, but Ming Yue, “Fair Moon”) ended up in Dong Zhuo's harem and decides to win her back, but the beauty is afraid of the tyrant and fears for the life of her beloved husband. So, she persuades him to wait and be patient. He tries to be patient, but being Dong Zhuo's bodyguard, he is sometimes forced to meet Ming Yue in his lord's inner chambers. The love longing becomes unbearable and the former spouses begin a love affair behind the usurper's back. Only then the minister Wang Yun steps out to persuade the young man to kill the tyrant, which Lü Bu indeed does after working out the detailed plan of murder with the assistance of Wang Yun and other courtiers. In this version, the female figure is again a quiet,



submissive and gentle wife, and the protagonist is a blameless knight, forced to shed blood against his will. The writer absolves his countryman of all the crimes of the regime: unlike the historical and literary Lü Bu, Wang Fulin's character does not plunder graves, does not kill people left and right, does not betray his masters, but often gives them sensible advice that they are not smart enough to follow. He remains true to his promises, is faithful to his wife and family members and dies with dignity.

The novel is written in a sketchy, deliberately lapidary style that partly mimics the style of medieval Chinese *baihua* novels. I personally would have enjoyed it more had the author depicted his characters in a more multidimensional way without trying so hard to exonerate his protagonist.

Conclusion

The Chain Scheme is one of the most developed and refined plots in Chinese historiography, classical literature, as well as in theatre, film, and television. Its popularity has not diminished over time. The reason for this popularity must be sought in the compositional flawlessness, especially in the way it was reworked by Luo Guangzhong's genius.

Besides, the plot includes:

- 1) The motif of the struggle of good against evil, popular with all the mankind; the victory of good over a much more powerful evil, which at first seems invincible;
- 2) The “war of wits” motif, popular among the Chinese since antiquity, a brilliant stratagem that is based not on physical superiority over the enemy, but entirely on playing on their moral and psychological weaknesses;
- 3) The motif of romantic love; the separation and reunion of lovers, admired by the mass audience but subdued by the Confucian value system.

The revised plot absorbs elements from historical chronicles and literary sources, and then in a way it returns to the beginning, enriched in detail along the path. Diao Chan is always an intriguing image whose motivations vary from variant to variant, yet always form the stem of the plot. The image of Lü Bu swings from a dishonest scoundrel who kills benefactors for profit to a love addict in shining armors – and back again. But even in the versions where Lü Bu is a traitor and an opportunist, he is never entirely evil, and as the story progresses, his lust transforms into true love, distinguishing him from the other characters. The masculine heroes of the “Three Kingdoms” corpus pride themselves of their indifference to women, they despise love affairs and devote themselves solely to martial exploits and battles. Lü Bu is the one and only exception: where the protagonist Liu Bei, when in danger, abandoned his wife and children without pity or doubt, Lü Bu chose death at the end of his life's journey in order not to part with his beloved ones: he missed the opportunity to escape from the besieged fortress because his



wife and daughter couldn't follow him. Luo Guangzhong's novel presents this as a misplaced pity and weakness of character. The new times, however, have new interpretations.....



Pic. 10. The “Chain Scheme” characters on a tee mug. Origin: shot by the author of the article

In the second part of my work, I am going to follow the changes of the plot and artistic devices as they occur in the numerous 20th and 21st century TV-adaptations of the Chain Scheme plot. I will analyse artistic devices and narrative tropes in cinematographic versions of the story, trace the changes that the plot has undergone in modern TV-dramas and make some conclusions as to the clash of traditional and modern value systems.

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