The Beauty, the Beast and the Cinema. “The Chain Scheme” in Chinese Literature and Cinematography. Part 2

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Abstract

In the first part of the work, entitled “The Beauty, the Beast and the Red Hare” published in “Corpus Mundi” Vol. 3(2), 2022, I trace the origin of the “Chain Scheme” legend in the Chinese historical chronicles, analyze the development of the plot in the poetry, fiction and other works of art and make conclusions about the interpretation of the main characters’ morals and motivations in pre-modern Chinese culture. In the present paper, which is the second part of the same research, I analyze artistic devices and narrative tropes in TV versions of “Three Kingdoms”, I comment on the changes that the plot has undergone in the course of history and especially in modern TV-dramas and make some conclusions as to the clash of traditional and modern value systems.

Keywords
Body Image; China; Period TV Dramas; “Three Kingdoms”; “The Chain Scheme”; Literary and Cinematographic Image; Lü Bu; Diao Chan; Dong Zhuo; Cao Cao; TV-adaptation; Costume Dramas

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Кондотьер, Красавица и кинематограф. «План Цепи» в китайской литературе и кино. Часть 2

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Аннотация
В первой части работы под названием «Кондотьер, Красавица и Красный Заяц», опубликованной в журнале «Corpus Mundi» том 3(2), 2022, я прослеживаю происхождение легенды о «Плане цепи» в китайских исторических хрониках, анализирую развитие сюжета в поэзии, художественной литературе и других произведениях искусства и делаю выводы об интерпретации нравственного облика и мотивации главных героев в до-современной китайской культуре. В настоящей работе, которая является второй частью того же исследования, я анализирую художественные приемы и повествовательные тропы в телевизионных версиях «Троецарствия», комментирую изменения, которые претерпел сюжет в ходе истории и особенно в современных теледрамах, и делаю некоторые выводы о столкновении традиционной и современной систем ценностей.

Ключевые слова
образ тела; Китай; телесериалы; «Троецарствие»; «План цепи»; литературный и кинематографический образы; Луи Бу; Дяо Чан; Дун Чжо; Цао Цао; телевизионная адаптация; костюмированные драмы

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The short summary of the first part

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 Wan 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 (Sarakaeva, 2022a). The Chain Scheme is the most stylistically strong and textually rich episode of the novel, and it got numerous TV adaptations.

Figure 1. A modern image of Lü Bu in a computer games series. A computer screenshot
Recent scholarly research of the contemporary Chinese cinematography

One of the main and consistently popular categories of telenovelas in modern mainland China is costume series (so-called “古装 guzhuang”, i.e. “in ancient costumes”). Two different genres can be classified in this category: fantasy, including quasi-historical films about time travellers, usually our contemporaries, who for some mysterious reasons find themselves in the midst of important historical events, and proper history dramas. The proper-history group includes a variety of sub-genres, from heroic epics to harem series, historical detectives or comedies. Chinese costume fantasies are mainly intended for female viewers, they are extremely ornate, visual aesthetics is their main artistic nerve. The plots of such series focus on love and mutual self-sacrifice of lovers. To use D. Cawelti’s term, they follow a literary formula, with roles instead of characters and conflicts and arcs repeated from one film to another (Cawelti, 1977, pp. 5-36).

The proper history series, on the one hand, are somewhat less formulaic, as each of them is based on events and facts of true history, giving the narrative a certain authenticity. Yet historical films, too, have not escaped considerable stereotyping, which manifests itself through the selection of events chosen for adaptation, through the interpretation of the facts and, not least, through the introduction of a certain relatively unified set of characters in the scripts.

One can roughly single out two main strands in the body of academic literature on Chinese films and serials. One of them is represented by works of art criticism, focusing on the poetics of Chinese cinema. G. Bettison, editor of a collective monograph devoted to the phenomenon, explains the subject of his study as follows: “For cultural scholars, Chinese films acquire significance only as the embodiment of social events. Analysing films from the top down, the cultural scientist subordinates the aesthetic qualities of a film to a certain conceptual scheme, thus, the stylistic construction of a film interests them only insofar as it reflects sociological realities. Poetics, on the other hand, shifts the focus, the researcher of poetics studies the work of art ‘from the bottom up’, so that the starting point of criticism becomes the rules of form and style found in films” (Bettison, 2016, p. 2). In the same vein some recent studies follow, such as Deppman's monograph “Close Ups and Long Shots in Modern Chinese Cinemas”, which draws parallels between Chinese film aesthetics and traditional Confucian ethics (Deppman, 2021, p. 3), but in general the author focuses mainly on the visual range of films and the emotional response of the audience.

The second strand of film research is, in Bettison's terms, a “top-down” study of Chinese television and film production in terms of the socio-political and ideological meanings it realises. Several significant collections of research papers have been written within this framework. For example, in the collection “East Asian Cinema and Cultural Heritage”, D. Desser's study “Reclaiming a Legacy: The New-Style Martial Arts Saga and Globalized Entertainment” focuses on Chinese historical
cinema. The author looks at a series of ambitious film projects from the late 1990s and early 2000s as an attempt by Chinese studios to conquer Western screens. For this purpose, directors and screenwriters produce increasingly apolitical films, reducing and simplifying their eventful backgrounds to make them easier to understand for Western audiences, so that the story itself becomes “a display of costumes and palaces” (Desser, 2011, p. 7).

Figure 2. A modern image of Lü Bu. The picture serves as a theme for an Oppo cell phone. A tiger has never been a part of the hero’s imagery, it is added to underline Lü Bu’s ferocity.

Released in 2010, the collection of essays “Global Chinese Cinema. The Culture and Politics of Hero” is unusual in that it is devoted to an analysis of an award-winning Chinese historical film, Zhang Yimou’s “The Hero” (2002). The film tells the story of the physical, moral and intellectual confrontation between Qin Shi Huang, the first Chinese emperor who unified the country under his rule, and the Nameless Assassin. The film is analyzed in this collection from various angles, including three papers examining the emperor’s image, his historical role and moral evaluation. Guo Yingjie’s work, “Recycled Heroes, Invented Tradition and Transformed Identity” interprets the film’s imagery and motives as an attempt at national
self-identification through the creation of a suitable hero image and the recreation of a militant type of heroism (Guo, 2010, pp. 27-28). Y. Wang compares Qin Shihuang as portrayed in “The Hero” and in another film, Chen Kaige's “The Emperor and the Murderer” and concludes that “the change from a ruthless tyrant to a merciful hero reflects the change in the mass sentiment of the Chinese on the issue of China's unification” (Wang, 2010, p. 51).

A number of works describe the response of Western audiences to Chinese cinema and TV series. For example, D. Desser, in the aforementioned article “Reclaiming a Legacy”, pays considerable attention to the question of why European, and especially American audiences, who enthusiastically embraced “The Hero” in the early 2000s, have since met each Chinese historical film with a growing coldness and indifference (Desser, 2011, pp. 6-17). Yu Xu-wa in the same collection describes all Chinese and Hong Kong movies since the mid-twentieth century as an attempt to “sell” Chinese cultural heritage to Western audiences and, conversely, to adapt Western culture for the home consumer (Yu, 2011, pp. 27-51). Zhou Lixia subjects the reactions of the Russian audience to a similar analysis, examining its perception of Chinese TV-dramas (Zhou, 2021, pp. 91-106).

Ying Zhu in the monograph on Chinese TV-series analyzes two types of serials: family novels and historical – in the author's terminology “dynastic” – dramas. The author connects popular motifs and plots of TV series with current political conflicts or social demands. For instance, she explains the high demand for costume anti-corruption detectives and the central figure of the incorruptible judge as a public nostalgia for the totalitarian state with property equality of all citizens. And the interest in ambivalent historical figures such as the Han emperor Wu-di or the last rulers of the Qing dynasty is seen as a return of the Confucian subject matter of Sovereign and Subject to the public discourse (Zhu, 2008, pp. 22, 42).

In my recent paper about the medieval Chinese judicial system and the Confucian model of a fair judge I describe how the image of Judge Bao is developed and interpreted in the modern Chinese TV-dramas (Sarakaeva E., 2022b).

In her work “Strategies and Strategists in Chinese Historical TV Series” Asia Sarakaeva compares the image of a political strategist, popular in Chinese historical cinema, the origin of which she traces to historical chronicles and fiction “and the functionally close, yet not identical image of a noble minister” (Sarakaeva A., 2022, 149). The scholar shows, that on the scale of political culture as a whole, as represented by Chinese historical dramas, a Legist image of the Councillor is balanced by the Confucian image of the Noble Minister. Although their functions may overlap, yet for the most part the strategist advises the sovereign, while the minister rebukes him for unwholesome or unwise actions. Both of these images, as well as their entire cultural and value environment, perpetuate norms and attitudes characteristic of deep antiquity, that have set the ideological and intellectual continuum from the Warring Kingdoms through the imperial period up to the present day. According to Sarakaeva's findings, those historical dramas ensure that the Chinese political
culture with its characteristic types of self-reproduction in the new century and under new social conditions is fixed in the mass consciousness (Sarakaeva A., 2022). With each successive generation of Chinese administrators those values and strategies rooted in ancient history and transmitted by modern cinematography, would nourish the elite culture and influence on the way political decisions are made and implemented.

![The Chain Scheme in modern Chinese films and TV dramas](image)

The Chain Scheme in modern Chinese films and TV dramas

The twentieth and especially the twenty-first century breathed new life into an already popular story. The development of technology and especially the emergence of the virtual world made it possible to visualize the old plot, to paint it with new colours. Numerous film adaptations of the whole novel “The Kingdoms” or its certain chapters have brought with them new plot twists, new interpretations of characters, new themes and contexts. Or sometimes not so new: in the pursuit of originality, directors and screenwriters often return to old versions of the story. Many modern Chinese (and a few Japanese) TV dramas or big screen movies with the Chain Scheme episode share such recurring features as psychologism, search for unusual twists and background motivations and bigger than life characters.
This work leaves out of the study anime, manga, comics, and even cartoons that give some space to Chain Scheme or where it serves directly as the plot – such works of art are galore, some of them have, in my opinion, a high artistic value. Nevertheless, because of the space restriction I limit myself to movies and TV series screenings from the middle of the twentieth century to the present day. In this paper I am going to examine the structural elements of the Chain Scheme as they are presented in various films and series. I intend to trace how they change from film to film and to speculate on what meaning they receive in contemporary Chinese culture.

Below is the list of films and TV-dramas that served as a sauce of my analysis:

1. The film “Diao Chan” (貂蝉), 1958, Hong Kong.
2. TV-series “Diao Chan” (貂蝉), 1987, Hong Kong.
3. TV-series “Diao Chan” (貂蝉), 1988, Taiwan.
5. TV-series “The Romance of Three Kingdoms” (三国演义), 1994, mainland China, 28 episodes.
6. TV-series “Three Kingdoms heroes. The biography of Lord Guan” (三国英雄传之关公), 1996, Taiwan, 54 episodes.
10. TV-series “Diao Chan” (貂蝉), 2006, Hong Kong, 20 episodes.
11. TV-series “Three Kingdoms” (三国), 2010, mainland China, 95 episodes.
12. TV-series “Cao Cao” (曹操), 2013, mainland China, 41 episodes.
13. TV-series “The divine warrior Zhao Zilong” (武神赵子龙), 2016, mainland China, 49 episodes.
15. The film “The unrivalled divine warriors of the Three Kingdoms” (三国之战神无双), 2019, mainland China.
16. The film “The feat of Zhao Yun at Changban slope” (赵云传之龙鸣长坂坡), 2020, mainland China.
17. The film “The unrivalled heroes of Three Kingdoms” (真·三国无双), 2021, mainland China.

![Figure 4. A still from 2016 TV drama “Divine Warrior Zhao Zilong”. Gao Yixiang (高以翔) as Lü Bu, a popular Xinjiang actress of Uighur ethnicity Gulnazar as Diao Chan](image)

I made a short typology of the Chain Scheme structural elements as can be found in the above-listed movies and TV-series and will go through it very briefly.

1. Who came up with the plan?

While in all the previously discussed works of fiction the plan belonged solely to the minister Wang Yun, the cinema and TV adaptations seem to be not very happy about that. This is how they attempt to answer the question:

1.1. The Chain Scheme was invented by Wang Yun,
1.2. The Chain Scheme was invented by Cao Cao,
1.3. The Chain Scheme was invented by Diao Chan,
1.4. No one came up with the Chain scheme as such, the characters improvised based on the developing situation.

The highly intricate and successful Chain Scheme is being perceived nowadays as something too clever for a character like Wang Yun, who appears in the Three Kingdom corpus only to execute it and sink back into the oblivion. The modern Chinese costume dramas (the dramas that play against historical backgrounds) are very much obsessed with elaborate schemes and multi-layered intrigues, and the master-minds behind such intrigues are supposed to be incredibly cunning and clever. Cao Cao, the “great hero of his times”, renowned for his cunningness, seems a more appropriate person for the role of the scheme master and puppeteer. Unsurprisingly, films like “Lü Bu and Diao Chan”, “Diao Chan 2006”, “Magic
Kingdom 2: the unrivalled Gods and Demons”, “The unrivalled divine warriors of the Three Kingdoms” ascribe the honour to Cao Cao.

In “Gods and Demons” and lengthy Hong Kong and Taiwanese dramas the characters seem to improvise: they discuss the matter with each other, listen to each other’s advice and adjust their next step to the ever-changing situation, instead of coming up with the plan in its full elegant brevity. In the TV-drama “The divine warrior Lord Guan” Diao Chan plays such an active role in the making up and carrying out the ploy, that though she discusses it with Wang Yun, the initiative is always in her own hands. The same seems true with the film “The unrivalled heroes of Three Kingdoms” 2021.

2. Diao Chan's personality and motives:

The heroine emerges in Luo Guangzhong's “Romance of the Three Kingdoms” as an adopted daughter of Wang Yun, but it is not clear why, when and from where he had adopted her. In the medieval dramas she used to be a servant girl in general Ding Yuan's household (the position that was almost equal to a slave), was married to Ding Yuan's adopted son (or, according to “Pinghua”, also a house slave) Lü Bu and parted with him in the turbulence of a civil war. She later was found and picked up by the minister Wang Yun and remained his servant until he learnt that her husband was the famous Lü Bu, so he upgraded her to the position of a foster daughter. But in the novel “The Romance of Three Kingdoms” we learn only that she is Wang Yun’s foster daughter who can professionally sing and dance. The first question that pops up in one’s mind is – why? Wealthy childless Chinese did adopt the children of other parents, but those were always boys who were to continue the lineage and serve the ancestors of the family. Girls were given in marriage, they left the family and thus were not particularly important. Even their own daughters were of little use to the Chinese, much less would anyone adopt someone else's girl.

The film directors fill in this gap each in their own way. The origin of Diao Chan varies from the empress’ own daughter entrusted for some reason to Wang Yun's care (“Three Kingdoms” 2010) to a street rat whom he spots stealing from a vendor and takes into his house as someone who is unscrupulous enough to fulfil any dirty job for him (“Cao Cao and Cai Wenji” 2002). The most popular solution is to have Diao Chan lose her house and family when the usurper moved the capital city to Changan, with Wang Yun having mercy on her and giving her a shelter in his own house before he thought of some ploy to use her. Or she can be a neighbour's daughter who lost their family property (“Diao Chan” 1987 and 1988), or Wang Yun's own daughter born out of wedlock (“Diao Chan” 2006), or a court lady who escaped from the massacre after the regime collapsed and was picked up by Wang Yun (“Cao Cao” 2013) etc.

As for her character features, the image of Diao Chan is mostly shaped in the following way:

2.1. She is a courageous patriot who makes a conscious choice of self-sacrifice,
2.2. She is a tender loving girl concentrated entirely on her own love affair,
2.3. She's a jolly, giggly simpleton who changes her decisions spontaneously,
2.4. She is sensitive, intelligent and well-versed.

Once the question of the heroine’s origin is solved, the screenwriters have to solve one more question: why did she agree to take part in the conspiracy? Diao Chan is never depicted as a prostitute, yet the Chain Scheme in fact prostituted her, made a whore out of a decent lady of good standing. To give some verisimilitude to the story one has to come up with a solid explanation of her motives.

Figure 5. Diao Chan dances to tempt Dong Zhuo. A still from 2010 TV drama “Three Kingdoms”. The actress Chan Hao (陈 好) as Diao Chan.

The motives of the heroine can be classified in the following way:
2.5. She wants to help her father and the country,
2.6. She wants to save her lover,
2.7. She craves after wealth and luxury,
2.8. She gives in to pressure and manipulation.

The traditional motive would be the desire to save the country and help her father. This explanation remains the leading one in the cinema of the 20th century, while the more modern adaptations are less willing to accept the older motivation and therefore they start looking for something new. They start to feel that a female has a worth of her own and can’t and shouldn’t perceive herself as merely a men’s tool. The unquestioning readiness of the heroine to be bedded by angry and violent men that was taken for granted in the old times becomes simply not acceptable for
the modern audience (a considerable part of which being females). That’s why the screenwriters have to come up with new explanations. And here the “save her lover” motivation comes very handy: the heroine is ready to sacrifice for love, not for some political schemes, and decides on it after much deliberation. Or she falls victim to men’s guile and manipulation – the motive that also resonates in the hearts of today’s audiences.

Some of these motives can intertwine: thus, in the 2006 TV-series “Diao Chan” the heroine’s fiancé was wrongly imprisoned by the tyrant’s regime and she intends to save him, but being a peasant girl from a faraway village, she can’t do much. Her beauty catches the eye of two cunning politicians, Cao Cao and Wang Yun, and they start to pressure her into compliance. Once they see she is not going to prostitute herself to save the country, they persuade her that it’s the only way to save her fiancé, he wouldn’t be released until the tyrant is dead. Here two motivations – to save the country and to save the man she loves – are employed simultaneously.

Finally, the heroine’s desire for wealth I saw only in one drama, “Cao Cao and Cai Wenji”, and this one is the weakest of all and totally illogical. The heroine agreed to be given as a gift to Dong Zhuo in order to get all possible richness and wealth, but once she got it, what made her carry on with the plan and flirt with Lü Bu? Wouldn’t it mean to destroy her own comfortable life with her own hands? The heroine in this movie also makes sex to Lü Bu at any opportunity, so the only explanation of her weird behaviour would be that this street rat and former thief willingly gave up luxury for the sake of good sex.

3. Wang Yun’s personality and motives

Those can be summarized briefly as:

3.1 He is an overbearing and manipulative egotist,

Strange though it may seem, Wang Yuan is depicted this way in about half of the screen works. The problem with such interpretation lies in the fact that as the result of the scheme Wang Yun gains nothing for himself, while his position under Dong Zhuo is more or less secure. Replacing patriotism with egoism creates a loophole in the story, though probably the filmmakers expect that the viewer, sympathizing with the young couple whose feelings are played by the ruthless old man, will not notice this contradiction.

3.2 He is a patriot forced to resort to dubious ways to save the country.

This classical understanding of Wang Yun as a patriot whose ultimate goal is to rescue his country from a bloodthirsty tyrant is in some films enforced by showing his suffering and shame that he had to feed his daughter to the lions to achieve it. In 2006 “Diao Chan” he even kills himself because of this shame. In 1958’s “Diao Chan”, in “Lord Guang” and some other films the image swings from one pole to the other: Wang Yun, for instance, demands in 1958’s “Diao Chan” that the girl after the successful assassination of the tyrant kills Lü Bu too. She certainly can’t do it because she is not a murdereress and because she starts having sympathy for Lü Bu touched by his genuine feelings. She begs of Wang Yun to give it up.
The viewer expects a new twist with Diao Chan and Wang Yun struggling over the matter, but the latter suddenly backs off and the film finishes with the couple's happy marriage.

4. Lü Bu’s personality and motives:

Lü Bu is, to my mind, by far the most interesting character among all. Where Wang Yun is more or less a formulaic image of a loyal minister and Dong Zhuo – of a cruel tyrant and the function of Diao Chan allows but a limited set of character interpretations, the role of Lü Bu allows a wider scale of psychological content:

4.1. He is a scoundrel, a narcissistic fool and a cold sadist ("The divine warrior Lord Guan", "Cao Cao", "Cao Cao and Cai Wengji"),

4.2. Though not a sadist, not even cruel, he is very selfish, focused only on his own desires and gains (Film “Diao Chan” 1958, TV-series “Diao Chan” 1987, TV-series “The Romance of Three Kingdoms”)

4.3. He is not devoid of moral sense and is capable of both good and evil (Musical series “Diao Chan” 1992, TV-series “Diao Chan” 2006)

4.4. He is a youngster with no moral compass, manipulated his whole life by older and smarter people who abuse his gullibility and physical strength (TV-series “Diao Chan” 1988, TV-series “Three Kingdoms heroes. The biography of Lord Guan”, TV-series “Lü Bu and Diao Chan”).

4.5. He is a slave to love, submitting his entire self to one single passion (TV-series “Three Kingdoms”, TV-series “The divine warrior Zhao Zilong”).

4.6. Wizened by age and suffering, he learned to value family above all (Film “The feat of Zhao Yun at Changban slope”, and especially the film “The unrivalled divine warriors of the Three Kingdoms”).

As for personal bearing, Lü Bu can be depicted as:

4.7. A suave young man who observes rules of etiquette,

4.8. A brutal ignoramus with bad manners,

4.9. A strange mixture of both: one moment he is polite and elegant, in another moment, when challenged or driven by passion, he is rude and threatening.

5. The relationship between Lü Bu and Dong Zhuo:

5.1. They are a perfect evil unit, accomplices in crimes and usurpation,

This is especially apparent in 2013 TV drama “Cao Cao” and in “Cao Cao and Cai Wengji”. In the latter drama Lü Bu takes delight in torturing and humiliating people, he even enjoys being cruel to a 7-year-old boy emperor. In 2001 mainland drama “The divine warrior Lord Guan” Lü Bu, a willing accomplice of the tyrant, is an epitome of wickedness: he is not much more than an envious, boastful, worthless idiot. In this drama Lü Bu is constantly juxtaposed with the title character, Guan Yū, who embodies everything that Lü Bu is not: rightfulness, dignity and integrity.

5.2. They genuinely love and respect each other as father and son,
Though this cinematographic decision might seem unexpected, we find it in the TV drama “Lü Bu and Diao Chan”, where the title hero is a naïve and wild child, a Mowgli ready to give his trust and love to anyone who shows him kindness. More so in 1988 Taiwan drama “Diao Chan”, where the father and son are so much attached to each other that no amount of manipulation and female interference seem to be enough to break their affection. Lü Bu in this drama loves and respects Dong Zhuo so much that he even readily forgives him physical violence and severe punishment that the father subjects him to. It takes the film director many twists and turns of the plot to make the one kill the other, and that is done almost in a fit of insanity.

5.3. Lü Bu is increasingly uneasy around his lord, afraid for his own safety.

This is the most common decision, logical and predictable. It follows the classical Chain Scheme with Lü Bu going through successive stages of resentment, frustration, fear and rage resulting in his decision to kill his foster father.

Why does he kill Dong Zhuo after all? The films and dramas I analyzed have the following solutions:

5.4. He kills Dong Zhuo almost by accident, prompted by fear and incitement,
5.5. He kills Dong Zhuo purely for the sake of Diao Chan,
5.6. He kills Dong Zhuo out of a mixture of resentment, guilt, and a desire to save Diao Chan.

6. The relationship between Lü Bu and Diao Chan

Figure 6. An image from the official site (now non-existent) of 2010 TV drama “Three Kingdoms”. Lü Bu marries Diao Chan and enjoys family bliss
6.1. They both fall in love almost at the first glance,

This is a popular move that was employed even earlier than the plot hit the screens, in regional and Beijing operas. Diao Chan falls in love with Lü Bu even before she sets her eyes on him in the beautiful and thematically rich musical series “Diao Chan” 1992, she falls for him at the first glance in TV-series “Lü Bu and Diao Chan”, in tremendously popular TV-series 2010 “Three Kingdoms” that still enjoy reputation of China’s highest ranking drama, and the more recent “The divine warrior Zhao Zilong” of the year 2016.

6.2. She falls in love with him against her own will in the course of their interactions,

The intrigue becomes thicker if Diao Chan grows to love the man she is supposed to beguile and destroy, as happens in the early Hong Kong film of 1958, or in the musical “Diao Chan” where Lü Bu wins her over not with the words of love but with his deep remorse for his crimes. His readiness to fight and die for her wins the fair damsel's heart in the film “Magic Kingdom 2”, which is more a screen visualization of computer games than a product of its own.

6.3. She has never loved him, but accepts him and feels sorry for him,

Both in literary works (with the exception of Yuan dramas) and in screen versions the male character has one deplorable feature: he is not clever and he even knows it himself. When the screenwriters show Diao Chan an intelligent and sensitive lady, they sometimes can't find reason for her to love a gorilla with muscles. Or she has already fallen in love with someone else: either a simple but devoted guy, her fellow villager or a next-door neighbour (“Diao Chan” 1987, 1988, 2006), or a true hero in full possession of what Lü Bu lacks: wits and morals. In this case her hero of choice is Guan Yü (“The biography of Lord Guan”, “The divine warrior Lord Guan”) or even Cao Cao (“The unrivalled divine warriors of the Three Kingdoms”). But if she stays with Lü Bu and shares his fate, she is bound to feel at least a little attached to him and feels pity for him in his sufferings. She asks his pardon for having beguiled and manipulated him (“Diao Chan” 1992, 2006, “The unrivalled divine warriors”), and pays with her own death for his downfall.

6.4. She despises him,

This happens only in one TV-drama, “The divine warrior Lord Guan”. In other screen adaptations Diao Chan might despise him initially, yet she learns to harbour more tender feelings for him in the course of time.

6.5. He doesn't love her, but holds on to her as a prized possession.

This happens only in one TV-drama, “The divine warrior Lord Guan”. In absolutely all the other screen adaptations of Chain Scheme Lü Bu's genuine love for Diao Chan is a given constant.

7. The relationship between Lü Bu and Diao Chan after the execution of the plan:

7.1. After completing her mission, she runs away and hides,
The preceding tradition of Chain Scheme plot has nothing to say about the fate of Diao Chan. After the successful execution of the plan and the death of the usurper, she simply disappears from the narrative. In the animated series and in a number of films, this gap is filled by the girl's escape: no longer willing to serve as the plaything of men's passions, she sits down in a cart and rides away to unknown lands (In 1987 drama “Diao Chan” she hides in a nunnery and takes the veil). This romantic picture, of course, does not fit the harsh reality of a war-ridden country, where such an escapee would immediately become the prey of road bandits. So, in most of the films Diao Chan just waits to see what happens to her, and then Lü Bu comes and claims her for his wife. She can be initially repulsed by the necessity to marry him, but persuaded by Wang Yun insistent pleas (who wants to continue controlling Lü Bu), or by the warrior’s sincere feelings she gives up and becomes his wife. Sometimes the film will leave them there, but more often it follows the couple to their tragic end. What happens to Diao Chan afterwards?

7.2. She becomes Lü Bu's wife and gives him political advice,

![Figure 7. A still from 2021 movie “The unrivalled heroes of Three Kingdoms”. Diao Chan attempts a suicide but is rescued by Lü Bu. Source: ](https://cj.sina.com.cn/articles/view/7521077618/1c04a897200100z6vd?autocallup=no&isfromsina=no)

7.3. She becomes his wife and gives him moral advice,

More often than not both is true, she consults him in both political and moral issues. Diao Chan is shown to be much more decent and with higher moral upstanding than her husband, so all the good and ethical decisions that he makes are the result of her influence, while his bad decisions are taken behind her back. See, for instance, 1992 musical “Diao Chan”, 2010 “Three kingdoms” etc.

7.4. She becomes his wife and makes fun of him,

This happened only in the 2001 TV drama “The divine warrior Lord Guan”, where after the initial infatuation the couple feel burdened by each other and spend their time quarrelling and blaming each other.
7.5. She becomes his wife but spies on him for his enemies.

This happened in the 2019 film “The unrivalled divine warriors of the Three Kingdoms”: here Diao Chan has been Cao Cao’s spy from the very beginning, she follows Lü Bu specifically to report his plans and whereabouts to Cao Cao. The bitter disappointment at the revelation of her true role causes Lü Bu’s death. She follows him with a suicide, giving the story a tragic “and then they all died” arch.

8. The end of Diao Chan:

8.1. Having accomplished her mission, she flees and goes into hiding (I already discussed it above)

8.2. She becomes Lü Bu's wife and commits suicide after his death,

This one is the most frequent anti-climax of the plot. If Diao Chan is depicted to love her husband, she would kill herself to be united with him in death. If she follows him out of habit or pity, she kills herself not to fall in the hands of the enemy. Her suicide is often preceded by a parting dance: she dances before Lü Bu if he is still alive, or before an imaginary Lü Bu if he is already dead. In 2020 “The feat of Zhao Yun at Changban slope” the heroine's death is the weirdest of all: she dies so that he wouldn’t be blackmailed into submission. After they are both captured, Lü Bu first proudly refuses to serve Cao Cao, but when the victor points at the captive Diao Chan, he falls on his knees and promises his loyalty. Cao Cao is happy to have him, but Diao Chan suddenly cuts her throat to stop Lü Bu from humiliating himself, thus bringing him to unnecessary death. But really, why would a loving wife want her husband to die rather than be another man's subordinate? Cao Cao is not a disgraceful tyrant in this movie, nor Lü Bu an upright moralist, so the suicide episode makes very little sense. The filmmakers obviously wanted to insert a popular motive of self-sacrifice into the story, but in this case, it was pretty much misplaced.

8.3. She is killed by a third party after Dong Zhuo's death,

This is the end of the heroine in the TV series “Cao Cao and Cai Wenji”. Concerned that she would confess the Chain Scheme to Lü Bu, Wang Yun murders Diao Chan before the warrior comes to claim his booty. In 1988 Taiwan drama Wang Yun attempts to kill her, but she manages to escape.

8.4. She is killed by a third party after Lü Bu's death.

It is quite in line with traditional Chinese interpretation of gender roles to blame females for the mistakes of males, to hold beautiful wives and concubines responsible for the failure of their princely husbands. In at least two of the eight Yuan period dramas Diao Chan is directly faulted by other characters for Lü Bu’s downfall. In the play “Guan Yū talks to Diao Chan” the title hero rebukes her with such harsh words:

“Speaking about Lū Bu, he killed Dong Zhuo and started a war, he left the capital Changan and the emperor’s carriage and was reduced to this seat in Xiapi— and all this
because of you! All of this happened because of Diao Chan, because of you he died in misery at the White Gates”.

“I heard about his bad reputation. It is you who set him up. You instigate Lü Bu without good advice and loyalty. You made him kill Dong Zhuo for you and left him without good advice” (Tang, 2018, pp. 76-77).

Diao Chan is confronted with such sort of accusations in the TV drama “The divine warrior Lord Guan”. But unlike the Yuan period plays, where she was being unjustly blamed for the misfortune of the man whom she, in fact, did love, the heroine in this TV drama had really set him up and helped the enemy to take him prisoner, so her death at the hands of the third party seems a right punishment for the treason.

Figure 8. A promotion poster of 2021 movie “The unrivalled heroes of Three Kingdoms”.

A popular and very experienced Hong Kong actor Gu Tianle (古天乐) as Lü Bu, the Uighur actress Gulnazar retrieves her role as Diao Chan

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1 See how Confucian moralists would again and again insist that females have no right to interfere in men’s affairs and decisions with their advice – and then; when males fail; blame females for not giving the right advice
2 Translated by the author
Clash of values

Asia Sarakaeva’s research “Political Philosophy of Chinese Historical TV-Shows” examines the ideas of modern Chinese people about the state, the mutual rights and duties of the individual and society, the proper public administration methods and actors, the role and place of China in the system of international relations and identifies the main ideas that explicitly or implicitly identify this ideological complex. The author argues that some political views have evolved from traditional to more modern ways of thinking. In particular, there has been a more favourable assessment of women’s rule, a change in views on the participation of military and civilian officials in the life of the state etc. Yet the scholar notes the extraordinary persistence of the Chinese people's set of political ideas, their direct continuity with the traditional political philosophy of old China, developed in the pre- and early imperial periods (Sarakaeva A., 2020). For our topic, this work is especially interesting because it provides a vector for analyzing Chinese historical drama from an axiological perspective.

Perhaps, the main difference between modern film adaptations of the story and its traditional literary interpretations is the same recurring motif: love justifies the actions of the characters and elevates their deaths to tragic heroism. Whereas Lü Bu's infatuation with a beautiful woman used to be shown as banal lust or clumsy flirtation, it has been replaced by a depiction of deep, heart-piercing, spiritually transforming love of one human being to another. This love starts with appearance but goes deeper to unite the souls. This love elevates, justifies and calls for sympathy, even with all the hero's flaws and mistakes. Sometimes it even makes the hero realize his errors, repent and make attempts to correct them. Love for a clever and noble woman teaches the hero mercy and generosity, so his deaths seems tragic and undeserved (this is especially true for the musical series “Diao Chan” shot in mainland China in 1992 and the film “The feat of Zhao Yun at Changban slope”, 2020, where Zhao Yun, a famous warrior of the rivalling party, infiltrates the ranks of Lü Bu's warriors and tries to gain his trust to betray the enemy's plans to his master. But once he gets to know Lü Bu and Diao Chang – the matured, wizened veterans of the internecine wars, who have learned to value the quiet harbour of family happiness more than the glitter and tinsel of military glory – the hero is moved to compassion and wants to save them, not to destroy them.

1 Remember the typical title of various regional Chinese opera dramas: “Lü Bu flirts with Diao Chan” (吕布戏貂蝉)
In correspondence with the conclusions made by A. Sarakaeva in her work on the image of the adviser in Chinese costume series (Sarakaeva A., 2020), in the film adaptation of the Chain Scheme I see an attempt to rethink the role of women in history. Thus, in the literary tradition Diao Chan acts as nothing more than an instrument in the hands of scheming men (even if she is a finely tuned and willing instrument), and this is interpreted as a completely normal situation, but in film adaptations her role in the story is almost always rethought.

In some films, the director clearly feels sympathy for the poor girl who is forced to give her virgin body to the usurper, and even to play love where she is suffocating with disgust. Diao Chan is shown a victim of cruel and egotistic males, not their willing tool. Such are, for instance, the Taiwanese TV-series “Diao Chan” of 1998, the mainland China TV-series “Lü Bu and Diao Chan” of 2001, the Hong-Kong TV-series “Diao Chan” of 2006.

But more often modern film adaptations of the plot attribute to Diao Chan an active role not only in creating and implementing a plan to kill the usurper: the heroine knows what she wants, she has her own vision of the desired scenario, she can clearly verbalize her goals and intentions and get cooperation from men. Even if she has to become a participant in the intrigue, and for this to lie and manipulate, her heart is always in the right place – she does not get indifferent to the fate of the person deceived by her, she follows him and shares his fate even if she does not feel love for him (almost all the other cinema versions of my list fall into this category). So to my belief, focusing on a female audience and rethinking the role of
women in a more positive way allow modern directors to make the image of the heroine more convex and bright, which certainly adds artistic merits to the screen versions of the Chain Scheme story.

At the same time, not all directors manage to maintain a balance and show a good combination of historical drama with a focus on political struggle, internecine wars and intrigues – and a story about loyalty and love that humanizes all these political battles (the “Three Kingdoms” of 2010 is a bright example of success in this regard). Many of them slide into a trivial love drama, losing the semantic richness of the plot, which was originally based on the military and intellectual struggle between different political forces. Wiping out everything that does not concern love, the directors produce sometimes nothing more than a sentimental and tedious soap opera.

**Conclusion**

First I would repeat the conclusion of the first part of this research:
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 and the possibilities of explaining, re-working and re-creating that the story contains (Sarakaeva, 2022, p 78).

The second part of the works examined the development and changes that the plot underwent in modern Chinese films and TV-series. With the country-wide fame that the novel “The Romance of Three Kingdoms” enjoys in China, one would expect that, having passed through the bottle neck of the canon, the plot would lose all other interpretations and variations, one would expect that from the moment Luo Guangzhong shaped it into perfection all the details and motivations he rejected would be forgotten. This, however, is not the case. My analysis of film and television production showed that screenwriters in search of original ideas turn to the existing textual corpus, recombining elements borrowed from tradition in accordance with their own authorial intentions.

Besides, the stocks of folklore enriched cinematography with such motifs as “the hero receives his miraculous weapon from a wizard or a sorceress” (“The Unrivalled Heroes of Three Kingdoms”), “the hero tames a wild horse and he becomes his good friend” etc. An interesting motif is that of “Diao Chan praying to the moon”. In works of applied art, such as paintings on silk and on and ceramics, drawing with sand, appliqués and modern computer art design, this motif is quite popular. Since praying to the moon was not the custom of young girls in the Chinese antiquity, this prayer of the heroine seems strange. The reaction of Wang Yun, who caught his adopted daughter doing this, is also surprising: anger and suspicion of lewdness. The motif becomes clearer when one remembers that the image and name of Diao Chan first appeared in Yuan period theatrical dramas, where she is the lawful wife of Lü Bu, separated from him by the vicissitudes of war.
The Old Man of the Moon is the deity that seals marriage unions, he can be prayed to for the reunion of spouses. The original meaning of Diao Chan's prayer is that she begs the moon to bring her husband back. Wang Yun, who caught her doing so, thinks she is in the throes of debauchery and is eager to get married. To justify herself, the heroine explains that there was nothing impure about her prayer: she wants to return to her legitimate marriage. In later literary interpretations of the story, the idea of Diao Chan as a faithful wife longing for family reunion was replaced by the role of a seductress engaging men in a deadly feud. The heroine's reason for praying to the moon disappeared, but the image of midnight solitary prayer remained, never filled with a new meaning.

The only image that remains almost unchanged is that of Dong Zhuo, who always serves as the embodiment of evil and a brutal, brazen force that flouts the law and morality. The images of the other three characters in the drama (Diao Chan, Wang Yun, and mostly Lü Bu) change from episode to episode and from film to film, sometimes almost to something entirely opposite. And despite the fact that each of the characters has their own perspective, their own fixed role in the events, the dynamics and the key of the relationships between them also change a great deal.

Figure 11. A still from 2010 TV-Drama “Three Kingdoms”. Dong Zhuo and Diao Chan. Source: https://nimg.ws.126.net/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fdingyue.ws.126.net%2F2022%2F1209%2F72c032hej00rmLnyy000zc000fe00ebm.jpg&thumbnail=660x2147483647&quality=80&type=jpg
I didn't find, unexpectedly, any distinguishable vector in the development of this plot in its modern stage. The few innovations that modernity has introduced are rather subtle accents on the motifs that were already invented in pre-modern stages. Of these innovations the most visible is the increase in the heroine's subjectivity. In contemporary TV adaptations, Diao Chan often appears as an individuum with a personality and agenda of her own, she refuses to simply subordinate her life to the goals and values of the males, to be a plaything in their hands. In particular, after the execution of the Chain Scheme she would more often remain in the space of the drama, she retains her character, gives the hero advice, and is still an active agent instead of just waning away or being referred to as a nameless “Lü Bu's concubine”, as it happens in the text of the novel.

Sometimes the heroization of Diao Chan even goes so far as to present her as the author of the entire ploy, a situation completely impossible in the traditional Chinese culture, where a female could only be thought of as the doer of a good deed but never its initiator, whereas any deed conceived by a female always turned out to be a disaster for herself and everyone around her. Nevertheless, for the sake of objectivity, it should be remembered that even in traditional literary and especially theatrical interpretations of the plot, Diao Chan is one of the few politically active positive female characters in Chinese culture.

Another emerging (though not often realized) trend in the development of the Chain Scheme in the late 20th and early 21st centuries is the tendency to simplify the plot by excluding Wang Yun as the mastermind of the whole plan. The screenwriters may assign this role to the smartest of contemporary strategists (Cao Cao or Zhuge Liang), or to the direct executor of the plan (Diao Chan), or to Destiny in general.

The entire vibe and variation of plot solutions and character interpretations described above shows that the Chain Scheme continues to be one of the most productive formulas in the Chinese popular culture. It is a canon, but a canon open to change, a canon that absorbs and endlessly spawns creative works in the sphere of literature, cinematography, comics, animated films and computer games. The Chain Scheme plot inspires popular folk creativity, being a subject of the modern folklore in the truest sense of the term.

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