

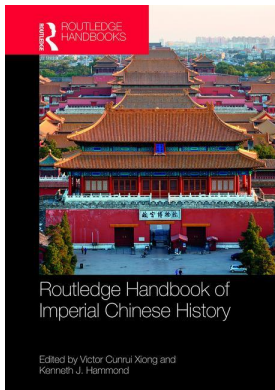
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 05 Dec 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

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Routledge Handbook of Imperial Chinese History

Victor Cunrui Xiong, Kenneth J. Hammond

The Three States (Three Kingdoms)

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315726878-7>

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Published online on: 02 Oct 2018

How to cite :- J. Michael Farmer. 02 Oct 2018, *The Three States (Three Kingdoms) from*: Routledge Handbook of Imperial Chinese History Routledge

Accessed on: 05 Dec 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315726878-7>

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THE THREE STATES (THREE KINGDOMS)

J. Michael Farmer

The Three States period marks the end of the Han dynasty and the beginning of nearly four centuries of political fragmentation in China. Encompassing the final three decades of the Han dynasty and another 60 years of autonomous rival states (Wei, Shu, and Wu), the era was characterized by warfare and diplomacy, the continuation of various Han political and social institutions (though with notable innovations), and the rise of new strains of literature and thought. Despite an abundance of historical sources, the period is best known from later literary and popular accounts of the warriors and statesmen of the time.

Eastern Han warlords, c. 189–220

The end of Han imperial rule, for all practical purposes, came when General Dong Zhuo 董卓 entered the capital city of Luoyang 洛陽, removed the young, recently enthroned Liu Bian 劉辯 (176–190; Emperor Shao 少), and replaced him with a half-brother Liu Xie 劉協 (181–234; Emperor Xian 獻) in the ninth month of 189. Immediately, various parties rose up to oppose Dong Zhuo and assert their own interests. With the emperor a captive, the Han imperial family held no effective power, and while Liu Xie held the title of emperor until 220, the Han dynasty was actually over. The scramble for territory and authority had begun and continued for 30 years.

Resistance to Dong Zhuo came from all corners. Troops were raised by local elites and mid-level officers. In 191, the army of Yuan Shu 袁術 (d. 199) drove Dong Zhuo from Luoyang westward to Chang'an 長安, where Dong was killed in 192. Following Dong Zhuo's death, a number of powerful elites, provincial officials, military officers, and soldiers-of-fortune staked out regional strongholds. Some professed to defend the Han imperial house, though most were seeking personal benefit. A number of these warlords came from established families, including both Yuan Shu and Yuan Shao 袁紹 (d. 202), whose ancestors had held high-level appointments at the Han court. Other contenders, such as Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220), came from more middling backgrounds, possessing sufficient resources to build private armies. Several officials, who had been initially appointed by the Han court to administer the provinces—such as Liu Biao 劉表 (142–208) governor (shepherd; *mu* 牧) of Jing 荆 province, Liu Yan 劉焉 (d. 194) and his son Liu Zhang 劉璋 governors (shepherds) of Yi 益 province, and Tao Qian 陶謙 (132–194) governor (shepherd) of Xu 徐 province—sought

to increase their power and authority in the chaotic times. Others like Lü Bu 呂布 (d. 199), Sun Jian 孫堅 (155–191), and Liu Bei 劉備 (161–223) were mercenaries, basing their claims to authority on personal charisma and martial successes.

During this turmoil, alliances between warlords were fluid, and territorial control shifted quickly. In the early 190s, Yuan Shao controlled a vast expanse of territory north of the Yellow River. Between the Yellow and Huai Rivers, Yuan Shu, Cao Cao, Tao Qian, Lü Bu, and Liu Bei fought for control of the region. By 198, Cao Cao was in possession of south-central China; moreover, he had also gained custody of Emperor Xian in 196. Cao Cao moved the emperor to Xuchang 許昌 in Yu 豫 province and established an imperial court there. By 199, Yuan Shao and Cao Cao were the dominant powers in North China. The balance of power in the North shifted in favor of Cao Cao in the summer of 200, as his troops withstood a siege by Yuan Shao's army at Guandu 官渡 (northeast of Zhongmu, near Kaifeng, Henan), then drove Yuan's troops back to the north. Following Yuan Shao's death in 202, and Cao Cao's victory over the Wuhuan 烏桓 tribe in 207, Cao Cao was left in control of the North China Plain and about half of the population of the late Han Empire. With his consolidation of power in the North complete and the emperor under his control, Cao Cao turned his attention to the South.

Power in the South was concentrated in two camps. Liu Biao controlled Jing province, while the Sun family occupied the lower Yangzi region. Sun Quan 孫權 (182–252) expanded his family's territorial base, gaining control of the middle Yangzi area in 208, and commanding a powerful and effective naval force along the middle and lower reaches of the river. In the autumn of 208, Liu Biao suddenly died. His younger son, Liu Cong 劉琮 succeeded him as governor, and with Cao Cao's forces approaching from the North, Liu Cong surrendered to Cao Cao. Cao Cao thereupon took control of Jing province, luring a number of scholar-officials from Liu Biao's inner circle to his own. Liu Bei, a former supporter of Liu Biao, however, attempted to defend the Yangzi from Cao Cao. Defeated by Cao Cao, Liu Bei sought assistance from Sun Quan in the east.

The forces of Cao Cao, Liu Bei, and Sun Quan staked out positions along the Yangzi. Liu Bei was burdened by a large company of non-fighting personnel. Liu Bei's lieutenant, Guan Yu 關羽 (d. 219), controlled the Han River 漢水 with a strong naval fleet. Meanwhile, Cao Cao possessed the former Jing province fleet, stationed upriver at Jiangling 江陵. In the east, Sun Quan wavered, but eventually sent troops led by Zhou Yu 周瑜 (d. 210) west to join Liu Bei and engage Cao Cao at Red Cliffs (Chibi 赤壁) along the middle reaches of the Yangzi. Cao's troops were exhausted and sick; moreover, many of his naval troops had formerly been employed by Liu Biao and may have been conflicted in their loyalties. Cao Cao launched the initial attack across the river, but his troops were repelled. Then, the wind shifted, and Zhou Yu responded with an attack using fireships, resulting in great panic on the part of Cao's soldiers, who beat a hasty retreat northward. Troops left behind by Cao Cao at Jiangling were defeated the following year by Zhou Yu, leaving the allies Sun Quan and Liu Bei in full control of the Yangzi River basin. However, Cao Cao's power still reached as far south as Xiangyang 襄陽 in the Han River basin.

The alliance between Sun Quan and Liu Bei originally cast Sun as the dominant figure; however, after the Battle of Red Cliffs, Liu Bei asserted his independence. In 209, Liu Bei seized control of territory in the Xiang River 湘水 basin, straining the alliance, and the following year, Sun Quan ceded the area around Jiangling to Liu Bei, retaining control of the eastern portions of Jing province for himself.

Now in control of the western reaches of the middle Yangzi, Liu Bei set his sights on the territory upriver to the west: Yi province. The province had been controlled by another branch

of the Liu family since 189, when Liu Yan 劉焉 arrived in the region as governor (shepherd) and army supervising commissioner (*jianjun shi* 監軍使; appointed by Emperor Ling). Hoping to establish himself as emperor, Liu Yan began producing court regalia and ritual objects, and planned to attack Emperor Xian's court in Chang'an, but died of ulcers on his back in 194. His son, Liu Zhang 劉璋, assumed his father's post and continued feuding with the local elites, including Zhang Lu 張魯, the leader of the Celestial Masters Daoist community.

Liu Zhang invited Liu Bei into Yi province, hoping to use his troops to attack Zhang Lu in Hanzhong 漢中 and quell uprisings throughout Yi province. Liu Bei entered the province in 211, and was greeted warmly by Liu Zhang and many of the local elites, but Liu Bei's refusal to attack Zhang Lu in 212 soured the relationship. The following year, Liu Zhang dispatched troops to attack Liu Bei, but they were defeated. In 214, Liu Bei laid siege to Chengdu, forcing Liu Zhang to surrender, leaving Liu Bei in control of the Chengdu Plain and the western half of Jing province.

As Liu Bei consolidated his authority in Chengdu, his rivals to the North and east each expanded their own territories and took action against his position in the west. Sun Quan extended his control over non-Han peoples in the South, and in 215, dispatched troops to attack the southern commanderies/regions of Jing province held by Liu Bei. The resulting stalemate led to a settlement, with Sun recovering some middle Yangzi territory and the establishment of the Xiang River as a boundary between Liu and Sun. In the North, Cao Cao attacked Sun Quan, but was unable to gain ground in the Yangzi basin. Cao then established agricultural garrisons in the Huai River basin. In 215, Cao Cao campaigned in Hanzhong 漢中, resulting in the surrender of Zhang Lu, which provided Cao with a direct route to attack Liu Bei in Yi province.

In addition to solidifying his position in the Huai River basin and occupying Hanzhong, Cao Cao strengthened his control on the Han court. Cao had held the title of chancellor (*chengxiang* 丞相) since 208, and his titles increased in prestige over the next several years: Duke of Wei 魏公 in 214, and King of Wei 魏王 in 217. After being named King of Wei, Cao Cao appointed his eldest son, Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226), as heir apparent.

By 218, the three rivals had each established their territorial bases and secured administrative control therein. The year 219 was a pivotal year. Early that year, Liu Bei defeated and killed Cao Cao's commander in Hanzhong and took control of the area. Cao Cao was unable to retake Hanzhong, and retreated north of the Qinling Mountains. Shortly thereafter, Liu Bei proclaimed himself King of Hanzhong, and professed his loyalty to the Han court. With Cao Cao on the retreat in Hanzhong, Sun Quan again attacked Cao's positions in Hefei 合肥 (in Anhui), but was unsuccessful.

Similarly, Liu Bei's lieutenant Guan Yu launched an attack up the Han River, laying siege to Fancheng 樊城 (in Xiangfanshi, Hubei). As Guan Yu harassed Cao's troops at Fancheng, Sun Quan made a significant policy change. Previously, Sun Quan had given priority to maintaining a good relationship with Liu Bei, viewing Cao Cao as the greater threat. As Liu Bei's strength grew in the west, however, Sun Quan feared that Liu, and in particular, the garrison of Guan Yu at Jiangling, would become a bigger threat than Cao Cao. As Guan Yu campaigned against Fancheng, Sun Quan's commander Lü Meng 呂蒙 attacked Jiangling. Guan Yu was killed and a large part of his army surrendered to Lü Meng, leaving Sun Quan in control of the middle and lower Yangzi, and most of Jing province. As 219 ended, the three rivals now held what was to be the core of their heirs' autonomous states with boundaries largely fixed for the next 60 years.

Early in 220, Cao Cao died. He had controlled the Han court for nearly 25 years, and bequeathed command of most of North China to his son, Cao Pi, who inherited his father's offices,

including chancellor and King of Wei. In the tenth month of 220, Cao Pi accepted the abdication of Liu Xie (Emperor Xian), thus formally ending the Han dynasty. Cao Pi proclaimed himself to be the second Emperor of Wei 魏, granting posthumous imperial status to his late father.

In the fourth month of 221, upon receiving a false report that the Han emperor had been killed, Liu Bei went into mourning and declared himself to be the next emperor of Han. Later historians tend to refer to his state as “Shu” 蜀, after the early bronze age state and Han administrative name of the region, or as “Shu-Han” 蜀漢. Sun Quan recognized Cao Pi’s claim to the throne, and Cao Pi appointed him as King of Wu 吳 in 221, though he continued to act independently of the Caos.

Chronological history of the Three States (Three Kingdoms)

Following the establishment of Wei by Cao Pi in 220, “Han” by Liu Bei in 221, and Sun Quan’s acceptance of the title King of Wu from Cao Pi (also in 221), the three rival states continued diplomatic posturing and military action against one another. In 222, Liu Bei attacked Sun Quan, seeking to avenge the death of Guan Yu and recover territory in western Jing province, but was defeated and forced to retreat west of the Yangzi River gorges. The following year, Liu Bei died. He was succeeded by his son, Liu Shan 劉禪 (r. 223–263), and a peace treaty between Shu-Han and Wu was quickly negotiated.

In 226, Cao Pi died and was succeeded by his son, Cao Rui 曹叡 (r. 226–239; Emperor Ming 明). The following year, the Wei general Sima Yi 司馬懿 (179–251) led an attack against Shu, but was unsuccessful. In 227, Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 (181–234) of Shu campaigned in Hanzhong against Wei forces. While some territory exchanged hands during these campaigns, Shu held firm in the Chengdu Plain, while Wei was secure north of the Qinling Mountains. In the east, Sun Quan upgraded his title by proclaiming himself Emperor of Wu in 229 (Map 4.1).

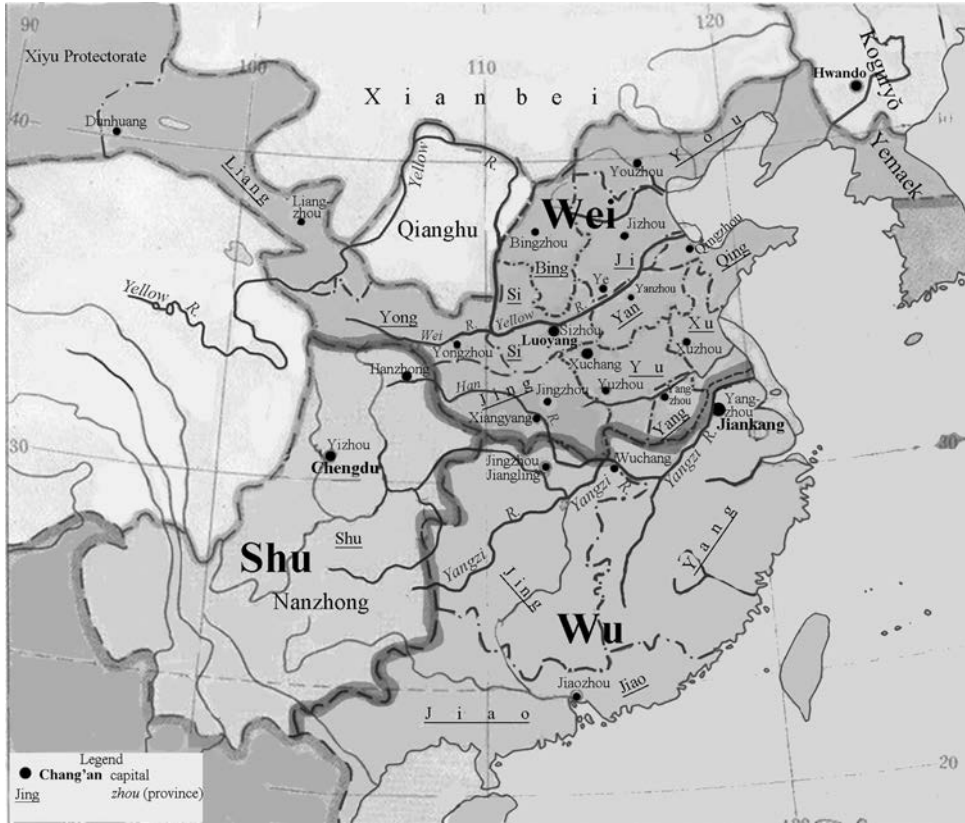
While the Cao family claimed the mantle of political legitimacy by virtue of accepting the abdication of the last Han emperor, and the Liu in Shu asserted their genealogical connections to the Han imperial family as the basis for their own claim to the Mandate, Sun Quan justified his claim to the imperial title on the grounds that the Caos were unworthy usurpers and the time allotted the Liu clan to rule had ended.

In the early 230s, Zhuge Liang continued his campaigns against Wei in Hanzhong, establishing agricultural garrisons to provision his armies. In 234, however, Zhuge Liang died, leaving both the civil and military leadership of Shu in flux. Squabbles between lieutenants led to defections and losses of territory. The appointment of Jiang Wan 蔣琬 (d. 246) as head of civil and military affairs in 234/235 offered a brief period of stability, and the general territorial stalemate between Shu-Han and Wei continued.

In 239, Cao Rui died and was succeeded by his seven-year-old adopted son Cao Fang 曹芳 (r. 239–254; king of Qi 齊王), with Cao Shuang 曹爽 and Sima Yi as co-regents. Cao Shuang held power at court, while Sima Yi focused on military affairs. In 247, Cao Shuang instituted several legal and administrative changes designed to secure his own position at court as Cao Fang approached maturity. In early 249, Sima Yi attacked the imperial entourage, killing Cao Shuang, his supporters, and kinsmen. The Sima clan now held complete power in Wei.

Meanwhile, in Shu, Jiang Wan fell ill in 243 and Fei Yi 費禕 (d. 253) was placed in charge of civil and military affairs. After Jiang Wan’s death in 246, Fei Yi was forced to share power with the general Jiang Wei 姜維 (202–264). Liu Shan was generally inattentive to matters at court.

Changes in top leadership positions in Wei, Wu, and Shu in the 250s led to an increase in military conflict between the Three States.



Map 4.1 The Three States (Three Kingdoms). (See Tan Qixiang, vol. 3, 3–4.)

In 251, Sima Yi died and his 43-year-old son Sima Shi 司馬師 (208–255) took charge of civil and military affairs in Wei. In late 252, he attacked Wu, but was unsuccessful. Facing opposition from the Cao family over his military failures, Sima Shi deposed Cao Fang in 254 and established Cao Fang’s cousin, Cao Mao 曹髦 (r. 254–260; Township Duke of Gaogui 高貴鄉公), aged 13, as emperor. In 260, Cao Mao attempted to rid himself of his overlord, Sima Zhao 司馬昭 (211–265), but was killed in the uprising. Sima Zhao then established Cao Huan 曹奂 as emperor (r. 260–265; Emperor Yuan 元).

In 252, the Wu ruler Sun Quan died, leaving the throne to the eight-year-old Sun Liang 孫亮 (r. 252–258; King of Kuaiji 會稽王). The following year, Wu attacked Wei positions at Huainan 淮南, but were defeated. Also in 253, Sun Liang ordered the assassination of his regent Zhuge Ke 諸葛恪, leaving his cousin Sun Lin 孫林 as the dominant power at court in Wu. In 258, Sun Lin deposed Sun Liang and replaced him with the 23-year-old son of Sun Quan, Sun Xiu, who, shortly thereafter, orchestrated a successful overthrow of Sun Lin and gained full control of the throne.

In Shu, Fei Yi was murdered in 253, leaving Jiang Wei in control of the military. Subsequently, the court came under the control of the eunuch Huang Hao 黃皓 and a low-level official named Chen Zhi 陳祗. Meanwhile, the court appointed Jiang Wei as general-in-chief in 256. Jiang launched a series of attacks against Wei, but was defeated in each campaign in 256 and 257.

In 263, Wei troops led by Deng Ai 鄧艾 and Zhong Hui 鍾會 defeated Jiang Wei and marched unimpeded to the Shu capital at Chengdu. After a heated debate at the court, Liu Shan surrendered, preventing what would certainly have been a rout, and secured a comfortable benefice for himself and his family near Luoyang.

In 264, the Wu sovereign Sun Xiu died and was succeeded by the 22-year-old son of the former heir apparent Sun He, Sun Hao 孫皓.

In 265, the Wei chancellor Sima Zhao died and was succeeded by Sima Yan 司馬炎, who also took the title of King of Jin 晉王. In the 12th month (early 266), Cao Huan abdicated the throne to Sima Yan, who established himself as emperor (r. early 266–290; Emperor Wu 武) of Jin. The matters of Jin from this point onward will be covered in the next chapter.

Now, with two states left standing in the post-Han landscape, military efforts to unify the realm increased. In 268, Wu attacked Jin at Xiangyang, while Jin launched an attack on Wu at Hefei 合肥. Neither side gained significant ground. In late 279, Jin launched a major offensive against Wu. When the action was not immediately successful, factions at the Jin court called for the execution of the leaders of the campaign; but on May 1, 280, the Wu sovereign Sun Hao surrendered to the Jin commander Wang Rui 王濬. The empire had become united again under Jin, thus ending the Three States period.

Three States: Wei

Emperors and top leaders

The groundwork for the establishment of the state of Wei was laid by Cao Cao while ruling under the nominal banner of the Han dynasty, and following his death and the abdication of the last Han emperor, the Cao family ruled Wei for almost half a century. The early years saw direct control of the state by Cao Pi. Later rulers were often young and under the authority of regents selected from members of the extended Cao family and later the powerful Sima family.

Cao Cao (155–220) was the son of Cao Song 曹嵩 (d. 193), who was the adopted son of a high-ranking court eunuch, Cao Teng 曹騰. While the Cao family was not counted among the old great families of the Han, they did possess sufficient resources and social position to recruit and command troops. Cao Cao came to prominence for his military success against the Yellow Turban uprising, and his power and influence continued to grow thereafter. Upon gaining custody of Liu Xie (Emperor Xian) in 196, Cao Cao consolidated his own power under the pretext of protecting the Han emperor. As a military commander, Cao Cao secured control over the vast territory of North China, defeating all major rivals in the North by 207. Efforts to expand control into the South, however, were less successful, with Cao's defeat at Red Cliffs in 208 effectively establishing the boundary between North and South. From this time onward, Cao Cao focused on the establishment of parallel administrations. Cao Cao held official Han titles and presented himself as a loyal subject of the emperor, yet he also maintained unofficial civil and military organizations under his own direct command. Many of the institutional innovations that are the hallmarks of Wei were implemented by Cao Cao. By the time of his death, the foundation for the establishment of a new dynasty had been laid.

Nine months after the death of Cao Cao, Cao Pi (r. 220–226; Emperor Wen 文帝) forced the abdication of Han Emperor Xian and established the Wei dynasty. During his six years on the throne, Cao Pi implemented a number of policies designed to strengthen the imperial office against potential threats. First, he embarked on a wide-ranging policy of exclusion,

removing his siblings and other kinsmen from the capital and prohibiting them from holding positions of real power. Additionally, Cao Pi restricted empress dowagers from playing any role in government, and decreed that members of the in-law families could not hold posts as regents to under-age emperors. These policies were implemented with an eye to both the practices of the past that contributed to the Han imperial family's demise, and to the future when subsequent Wei rulers might take the throne as minors. Outside of the palace, Cao Pi continued the system to recruit officials into the bureaucracy originally put in place by his father. Following the death of Cao Pi in 226, the full effect of his policies attempting to limit the power and influence of various factions at court became apparent.

The reigns of the remaining Cao rulers, Cao Rui, Cao Fang, Cao Mao, and Cao Huan, were characterized by power struggles between appointed regents and outright dominance by members of the Sima family (outlined in Section 2).

In early 266, the King of Jin, Sima Yan, deposed Cao Huan, thus ending the Cao rule of Wei and establishing the Jin dynasty. Based in Henei 河内 commandery, the Simas were a large and influential family, and had been long-time supporters of the Caos. Sima Lang 司馬朗, the elder brother of Sima Yi, was an early supporter of Cao Cao, and Sima Yi joined the ranks of Cao Cao's administration in 208. In 217, Sima Yi joined Cao Pi's cohort, and the two were purportedly close friends. Following Cao Pi's accession to the throne, Sima Yi's stature increased, and by 225, Sima Yi was in charge of civil affairs in Wei. During the reign of Cao Rui, Sima Yi's authority as a military commander grew, and he led successful campaigns in the northeast, expanding and securing territory on the frontier. Following a brief retirement during the regency of Cao Shuang, Sima Yi seized control of the Wei court. His authority was passed on to his younger brother, Sima Zhao, and his nephew, Sima Yan, the founding emperor of the Jin dynasty.

Political, social, and economic institutions

Even after the formal establishment of Wei, the general framework of the state closely resembled that of its predecessor. This included two innovations introduced by Cao Cao in the 190s.

In 196, Cao Cao established agricultural garrisons (state farms) (*tuntian* 屯田) near the newly established capital at Xu 許 (east of Xuchang, Henan). The impetus for these garrisons was twofold. First, the military required food, and second, North China had a large refugee population in the wake of the Yellow Turban uprisings of the 180s. Under Cao Cao's program, individuals and families received land to farm, along with critical supplies such as tools, seed, and oxen. These farmers were exempt from the standard taxes and duties; their sole responsibility was to produce food. In exchange, they paid the state between 50 percent and 60 percent of the produce. This share-cropping system incentivized higher production, provided a steady supply of food to the military, and allowed the farmers to avoid the cycle of debt common under the late Han tax and land tenure system. Moreover, it reduced private interests and tax fraud, and helped to instill a sense of loyalty toward the state. Most agricultural garrisons (*tuntian*) were located between the Yellow and Huai Rivers, while the old Han land tax system remained in force north of the Yellow River.

In an effort to combat corruption, nepotism, and cronyism in staffing governmental positions, Cao Cao reformed the traditional Han recruitment practice. In the Han, persons entered the bureaucracy on the basis of personal recommendation, typically by the administrator of each commandery (region), resulting in the widespread appointment of local elites to governmental office without regard to skill or aptitude. Cao Cao's reforms created a

system of Nine Ranks and Categories (*jiupin* 九品) by which a local official appointed by the court, the rectifier (impartial judge) (*zhongzheng* 中正), would assess prospective candidates for office by means of formal ranking and written summary of each candidate's ability. In theory, the system would eliminate the influence of local elites on the recruitment process by having the rectifier report directly to the court. In practice, however, little changed. Rectifiers were overworked and unable to properly assess candidates. Moreover, the opportunities for local elites to influence the rectifiers' rankings and recommendations remained, and as such, the administration of the Caos, both during the last years of the Han and throughout the Wei period, remained staffed by members of the great families of the empire.

The social and economic institutions of the late Han were also perpetuated under Cao rule. The Wei state continued to employ the household registration system, including a category for "military households" (*shijia* 士家), a class of hereditary soldiers and their families. Under Wei rule, the restrictions on military households increased, including prohibitions on marrying outside of their registered social category. Tenant farmers continued to make up a large portion of non-elite society. Outside of the Wei agricultural garrisons, the Han system of land and textile taxes remained in effect. Population estimates for Wei in the year 260 project 663,400 registered households, with over 4.4 million individuals.

Religion

Daoism and Buddhism continued to develop during the Cao-Wei period. Following Zhang Lu's surrender to Cao Cao in 215, the Celestial Masters Daoist community was relocated to the North, where its influence gradually spread throughout the Wei-controlled territory. Buddhism also strengthened its position in the North during the third century, with translation efforts concentrated in Luoyang. One monk, Zhu Shixing 朱士行, left Luoyang in 260, heading westward in search of original texts. Zhu settled in Yutian 于闐 (Khotan, Xinjiang), at that time an important hub of Buddhist activity, where he obtained and translated portions of the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (*Fangguang bore jing* 放光般若經). Zhu Shixing died in Yutian, and is regarded as the first Chinese monk to travel to the west.

Literature and scholarship

A large part of the cultural legacy of Wei was based on the Cao rulers' ability to attract and support intellectuals at their court. Cao Cao and two of his sons Cao Pi and Cao Zhi 曹植 (199–232) were talented poets. Cao Cao and Cao Pi actively sought out like-minded individuals for their entourages. The so-called "Seven Masters of the Jian'an," a literary circle centered on the then-heir apparent Cao Pi, included Kong Rong 孔融 (d. 208), Chen Lin 陳琳 (d. 217), Wang Can 王粲 (177–217), Xu Gan 徐幹 (170–217), Ruan Yu 阮瑀 (c. 167–212), Ying Yang 應瑒 (c. 170–217), and Liu Zhen 劉楨 (c. 170–217). At gatherings in Ye, members of the group composed short *fu* 賦 (rhapsodies), often praising rare and precious objects in the possession of the Cao family, and thematic *shi* 詩 (poetry) on the occasion of their gathering, typically banquets. In addition to the creation of verse, the Cao salon also facilitated both the discussion and circulation of literature. Essays and epistles by and between members of the group are among the earliest documents of literary criticism in China and provide evidence on the manner in which literary manuscripts were circulated in the early medieval period.

Additionally, the Wei imperial court also hosted a number of prominent scholars who specialized in Mystery Learning (*xuanxue* 玄學). Mystery Learning was a scholastic movement closely linked to the *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, and Yang Xiong's 揚雄 (53 BCE–18 CE) *Supreme*

Mystery (Taixuan 太玄), infusing mystical elements of these texts into classicist scholarship. While *Mystery Learning* originated in Chengdu 成都 (in Sichuan) during the early years of the Eastern Han, it flourished in Jing province under the administration of Liu Biao, and was brought to the Wei court when a number of the intellectuals attached to Liu Biao's office allied with Cao Cao in 208. Prominent *Mystery Learning* scholars at the Wei court included He Yan 何晏 (195–249; commentary on the *Lunyu* 論語), Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249; commentary on the *Laozi*), Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263), Xi (Ji) Kang 嵇康 (223–262), Xiang Xiu 向秀 (c. 223–275), and Guo Xiang 郭象 (252–312; commentary on the *Zhuangzi*). With their emphasis on “naturalness” and “spontaneity,” *Mystery Learning* scholars were often regarded as “libertines” by old-guard classicists, and the movement was closely related to the “Pure Conversation” (*qingtan* 清談) trend and the quasi-historical group of eccentrics known as the “Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove,” headed by Ji Kang and Ruan Ji.

The Cao court was home to several famous medical practitioners. Zhang Zhongjing 張仲景 (150–219) compiled the first scientific compendium of illness and treatments, *Shanghan zhabing lun* 傷寒雜病論 (Treatise on cold damage disorders and miscellaneous diseases). Hua Tuo 華佗, a holistic practitioner of internal, external, women's and children's treatment, and acupuncture/moxibustion, was noted for his innovative “Five Animal Exercises” (*wuqinxi* 五禽戲) pulling (*daoyin* 導引) techniques as a method of cultivating good health.

Foreign policy

In addition to the diplomatic and military engagements with its rivals Shu-Han and Wu, Wei foreign policy was also concerned with a vast northern frontier. Threats along this border included the Wuhuan in the northeast, and the state of Koguryō on the Korean peninsula. Cao Cao's successful campaign against the Wuhuan in 207 gave him control of all of the North China Plain at a critical stage of the late Han civil war, and provided some respite on the northeastern frontier. However, as the Cao family consolidated their power on the Central Plains and engaged with their rivals to the south, new threats emerged in the northeast. The Gongsun family established a base of power in the far northeast (present-day Heilongjiang). In 238, Sima Yi led a campaign against Gongsun Yuan 公孫淵, defeating the rival and securing the region. In 244–245, the Wei general Guanqiu Jian 毌丘儉 led a series of attacks on Koguryō, thus firmly establishing the northeast as secure territory for Wei. In addition to these military encounters, diplomatic envoys from Japan were regularly received at the Wei court. However, these exchanges with the peoples on the northern borders and beyond did not occupy a significant amount of attention from the Wei rulers. Their focus was fixed on the task of reuniting the empire.

Three States: Shu-Han

Emperors and top leaders

The reign of the Liu family in the southwest began with Liu Bei's coup that deposed Liu Zhang in 212, and continued as an independent state from 221 to 263 under the rule of Liu Bei (r. 221–223; Zhaolie 昭烈 Emperor) and his son Liu Shan (r. 223–263). Even with the early death of Liu Bei, the state of Shu-Han enjoyed an initial period of stability, followed by three decades of flux among the ranks of top civil and military officials.

Liu Bei claimed descent from a distant branch of the Han imperial family. Though his own natal family was poor, he was charismatic and gained support from kinsmen and local elites, allowing him resources to gather a large entourage, including the martial talents Zhang Fei 張飛 (d. 221) and Guan Yu. Liu Bei and his cohort gained fame as soldiers of fortune, first fighting against the Yellow Turbans in the 180s, and later serially allying with various warlords of the late Han. After the Battle of Red Cliffs in 208, Liu Bei moved westward up the Yangzi, eventually taking control of Yi province in 212. After Liu Xie abdicated to Cao Pi in 220, Liu Bei took the title of emperor for himself, and shortly thereafter launched a campaign against Sun Quan in Jing province. This campaign was unsuccessful. Liu Bei died of illness in the field in 223, and was succeeded by his son Liu Shan, with Zhuge Liang as regent.

Liu Shan assumed the throne at the age of 16 and ruled for nearly 40 years. His reign should be divided into two periods: the regency of Zhuge Liang (223–234), and the post-Zhuce Liang era (234–263). In neither period did the emperor take a personal interest in the affairs of government, leaving civil and military matters in the hands of officials while he spent his time sightseeing and frolicking with the women of the inner palace.

The leading official of the early years of Shu-Han was Zhuge Liang. Zhuge Liang was a noted recluse who came out of retirement to serve Liu Bei during Liu's sojourn in Jing province prior to the Battle of Red Cliffs in 208. The early years of his regency focused on providing relief to the common folk by reducing taxes and punishments, and reorganizing the bureaucracy. His main objective, however, was to fulfill a deathbed promise made to Liu Bei to assist Liu Shan in unifying the empire. Thus, military activity occupied much of his attention. In 225, Zhuge Liang led a campaign in Nanzhong 南中 (southern Sichuan and Yunnan) against non-Han tribesmen, and from 227 until his death in 234, he campaigned against Wei in Hanzhong.

Following the death of Zhuge Liang, civil and military leadership in Shu-Han was fluid. The office of chancellor, held by Zhuge Liang, remained unfilled, and a series of officials controlled civil and military matters. General-in-chief Jiang Wan, along with Fei Yi 費禕 (later director of the Imperial Secretariat [*shangshu ling* 尚書令]), Commandant of the Palace Guards (*huangmen shilang* 黃門侍郎) Dong Yun 董允 (d. 246), governed Shu for the next 18 years. The early years of Jiang Wan's administration were stable, with no major campaigns. The deaths of both Jiang Wan and Dong Yun in 246 led to major changes in Shu-Han policy. Jiang Wei 姜維 was promoted to the office of general of the guards (*wei jiangjun* 衛將軍) and began a series of campaigns against Wei beginning in 249. The murder of Fei Yi in 253 allowed the Chen Zhi-Huang Hao faction to take control at court. Jiang Wei remained in the field, engaging in five unsuccessful campaigns against Wei between 253 and 258. In 258, Jiang Wei dismantled long-standing defensive outposts in the mountain passes of Hanzhong, resulting in an invasion by the armies of Wei in 262, and the surrender of Shu in 263.

Political, social, and economic institutions

Upon seizing Yi province in 212, Liu Bei established a provincial governmental administration, assigning top positions to his earliest supporters, including Zhuge Liang, along with a few newfound allies who held posts under Liu Zhang. After the establishment of Shu-Han, the bureaucracy was only modestly expanded, and in the end, it still more closely resembled the structure of a province rather than an imperial bureaucracy. Zhuge Liang was appointed chancellor, and men of war were appointed to concurrent civil and military offices. Significantly, most of the top officeholders were, like Liu Bei, outsiders to the Chengdu region,

a fact that caused no small amount of resentment from local scholars and elites who were largely relegated to low-level posts. Liu Bei's, and later Zhuge Liang's, top priority was the conquest of Wei and Wu, and thus the civil side of governmental affairs was neglected, apart from those offices that aided the war efforts.

During the regency of Zhuge Liang, a concerted effort was made to include local scholars and elites in the bureaucracy, both at the court and in the commanderies. Men of local origins rose to higher posts, and in the south, local tribal leaders were given official titles and administered on behalf of the court. The inclusion of local talent helped to defuse tensions that had arisen under Liu Bei's policy of appointing his close confidants—mostly outsiders to the region—in positions of authority.

The state of Shu-Han had a modest population and abundant natural resources. Estimated census figures for 263 CE indicate 280,000 registered households, or about 940,000 individuals. In addition, some 40,000 were registered as officials, while 102,000 were soldiers. The Chengdu Plain was a well-watered and warm area, and as such, agriculturally rich. Moreover, salt, natural gas, and iron reserves allowed for industrial production necessary for a warlord state. In Nanzhong to the south, the land was forested and provided the state with a supply of timber, as well as large numbers of non-Han peoples available for duty as troops or laborers.

Religion

The Celestial Masters Daoist community formed in the Chengdu Plain in 143, after Zhang Ling 張陵 was purportedly visited by the deified Laozi, the Most High Lord Lao (Taishang Laojun 太上老君). The Celestial Masters settled in Hanzhong and operated as a theocracy, managing civil and spiritual affairs of its adherents. Local leaders, called libationers (*jijiu* 祭酒), had charge over troops, and, above them, great libationers (*da jijiu* 大祭酒) managed parishes. Each parish included a “house of charity” (*yishe* 義舍) where travelers could partake of free food. In 215, Celestial Master Zhang Lu surrendered to Cao Cao, who then relocated the community north to Tianshui 天水 commandery and the area near Luoyang and Ye.

Scholarship

Liu Bei was regarded as a ruler who recognized and valued men of talent; thus, a large number of individuals sought to enter his service. As he established his imperial administration, he attempted to revive the academy and other scholarly institutions. To staff these posts, he drew on two distinct pools of talent. The first group included scholars trained in the Mystery Learning tradition who had accompanied Liu Bei from Jing province in 211. The other group of scholars included locals who approached the classics from the perspective of the mantic arts. The two most noted practitioners of this local tradition were Qin Mi 秦宓 (d. 226) and his student Qiao Zhou 譙周 (c. 199–270), who both produced important works of classical commentary and historiography. Regardless of origin or academic approach, the scholars of Shu-Han were initially drawn to the Liu court in hopes of advancing through the bureaucratic ranks to posts with political power and influence, but few rose above clerical or tutorial positions.

In stark contrast to the Wei court, Shu-Han produced little in the way of literature. Only one *shi* (poem) attributed to Qin Mi remains extant.

Foreign policy

Shu-Han foreign policy was dominated by conflicts with Wei to the north and Wu to the east. The alliance between Shu-Han and Wu was strained, and each viewed the other as a rival to be conquered at some undetermined time. Diplomatic envoys regularly called on the courts at Chengdu and Jianye 建業 (Nanjing, Jiangsu), exchanging greetings, gifts, and subtle barbs. Shu-Han had no such diplomatic relationship with Wei, who was seen as a greater threat to unification than Wu.

Zhuge Liang's campaigns against non-Han tribesmen in Nanzhong may also be seen as a type of foreign policy. The lands south of the Chengdu Plain had been nominally under Han administration since the time of Emperor Wu, but were beyond the reach of the Han government and ruled by local tribal leaders. Native uprisings against local officials sent by the Han and Shu-Han courts were not uncommon, and given the abundance of natural and human resources in the region, bringing it under the control of the court in Chengdu was an early priority. Zhuge Liang's success in quelling an uprising and securing the loyalty of a powerful local chieftain named Meng Huo 孟獲 in 225 resulted in not only increased stability in the area, but an influx of 10,000 households of crack warriors to the Shu-Han army, and a supply of material resources for use by the military and court. Shu-Han's extension of control into Nanzhong did not result in colonization of the area. Nanzhong remained firmly under the control of locals, albeit locals who received favor in the form of titles and seals from the Shu-Han court. In the end, however, the additional stability and resources were insufficient to facilitate success in Shu-Han's obsessive campaigns against Wei in the North.

Three States: Wu

Emperors and top leaders

Sun Quan controlled the lower Yangzi area and the state of Wu for 50 years, providing a long period of stability for the region. Groomed for leadership by his elder brother, Sun Ce 孫策, Sun Quan took control in the year 200 upon Sun Ce's sudden death, and did so with the support of most of his brother's closest advisers. With territorial lines largely set between rival warlords after the Battle of Red Cliffs, Sun Quan expanded his control in the Yangzi basin and deeper into the lands of the South by means of conquest of indigenous peoples (Shanyue 山越) and colonization. Moreover, by allying with Liu Bei to the west and accepting investitures and titles from Cao Pi in the North, Sun Quan protected his holdings in the southeast. In 229, he proclaimed himself emperor of Wu, ruling over a state comprising local elites who controlled village and commandery life, and a bare-bones imperial court. Sun Quan's long tenure on the throne led to problems with succession, as his initial heir apparent died and a second appointed heir was deposed, leaving the throne to the eight-year-old Sun Liang when Sun Quan died in 252.

The reigns of Sun Liang (r. 252–258) and Sun Xiu (r. 258–264) were plagued by factional politics. Regents and kinsmen manipulated the throne, deposing Sun Liang and attempting to control Sun Xiu. Though initially placed on the throne under the authority of Sun Lin, Sun Xiu quickly took control for himself. His reign, however, was brief and unremarkable. Upon his death in 264, he was succeeded by his nephew, Sun Hao (r. 264–280), then in his early 20s.

Sun Hao held the throne in Wu for 16 years, but failed to restore the vitality of the reign of Sun Quan. Real power in the state was held at the local levels, and the court was unable

to marshal the human or material resources of the land to defend itself from the newly consolidated Jin in the North and west. In 280, Sun Hao was forced to surrender to the forces of Jin, thus ending the first post-Han period of division.

In the early years of Sun Quan's rule, he relied upon the support of his deceased brother's advisors, but over time, he developed his own cadre of supporters. The office of chancellor was initially held by Sun Shao 孫邵 (r. 221–229), and then by Gu Yong 顧雍. Sun Quan's early military leaders were Cheng Pu 程普 and Zhou Yu 周瑜. After the establishment of Wu as a state, Lu Xun 陸遜 held the top military position for many years. In later years, members of the extended Sun family dominated affairs at court, while the elite families of the villages and commanderies held sway in the localities.

Political, social, and economic institutions

The political administration of Wu was decentralized. Local elites maintained control over local political, social, and economic activities, even after the establishment of the Wu imperial court in 229. These great families accepted positions in the villages and commanderies, essentially receiving court recognition of the authority they already held in the outlying areas. In return, the local administrators offered up minimal tax revenues (based on quota rather than percentage of produce) to the court, and continued their own dominance of local affairs. Local economics functioned on a barter and exchange system, with few records for the court to audit. Most local elites held little interest in the affairs of the Wu court, and were generally concerned with maintaining their own power and wealth.

The Wu court was unable to achieve any real degree of centralized power, nor establish much more than a skeletal administrative structure. The Sun rulers largely did away with the old Han model of the imperial bureaucracy, and concentrated on maintaining a military organization capable of defending the borderlands with Wei and Shu-Han, and expanding southward acre by acre. Expansion into the South was, in fact, the most distinguishing feature of early Wu administration. After the death of Sun Quan, court politics devolved into factional rivalries between members of the extended imperial family, leaving the court in an even weaker position *vis-à-vis* the local elites of the state.

Southern expansion brought new territory under Wu control and added manpower and tax revenues from non-Han peoples to aid in the Wu military efforts. As Wu expanded southward, conquered non-Han peoples were registered as subjects, making them available for taxation and military and labor duty, including further expansion. These new areas were organized into counties, with the number of counties in the South doubling from 160 at the end of the Han to 322 in 280. Territorial expansion from the lower Yangzi spread southward, bringing areas in present-day Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Fujian, Guangdong, and northern Vietnam under nominal Wu control. By 280, Wu had a population of 523,000 registered households, with 2.3 million individuals. In addition, some 32,000 were listed as officials and 230,000 as soldiers. While Wu was unable to fully exploit the natural and human resources of these new lands, after the Jin court moved south in 317, the new territory proved essential to the survival of it and the Southern Dynasties.

Religion

By the third century, there was an active Buddhist community in the lower Yangzi region, and several important Buddhist figures were welcomed to the Wu court. Sun Quan was a patron and supporter of the translation efforts of the layman Zhi Qian 支謙. Additionally,

the celebrated monk Kang Senghui 康僧會, born in Jiaozhi 交趾 commandery (seat: near Hanoi), came to Sun Quan's court in 247, where he expounded on sutras and spread goodwill, leading to imperial support for Buddhist institutions within the borders of Wu.

Literature and scholarship

In general, literature and scholarship in Wu was not highly developed. Scholars in Wu produced works of canonical exegesis, but these scholars were generally relegated to tutorial roles at court. Mystery Learning was not well represented in Jianye. The most important literary and scholarly figures of Wu were the brothers Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303) and Lu Yun 陸雲 (262–303), grandsons of the Wu military commander Lu Xun. Though both were young at the time of the Jin conquest of Wu, the brothers were regarded as the most talented writers in Wu, and they were soon granted posts at the Jin court. Each brother wrote both *fu* (rhapsodies) and *shi* (poetry) that were highly regarded at the time and by later critics. Fifty-two of Lu Ji's *shi* poems are included in the *Wen xuan* 文選 (Selections of Refined Literature) anthology, the largest selection by any single poet. Moreover, Lu Ji's "Rhapsody on Literature" (Wenfu 文賦) stands as an important early work of literary criticism.

Foreign policy

In addition to the diplomacy and conflict between Wu and its rivals Wei and Shu-Han, and its colonization of the South, Wu maintained diplomatic relations with other foreign states in the region, including Linyi 林邑, Funan 扶南, and Tangming 堂明 (all located in present-day Indochina), as well as Japan. Additional efforts were made to establish military alliances with the Gongsun family who briefly held territory on the Wei northern frontier, but this mission was unsuccessful. South sea trade increased during the period, enriching the elites who continued to dominate the local markets, with little revenue reaching the court itself. In the end, the Wu state, which had begun as a vigorous expansionist warlord enterprise, stagnated into a factionalized court atop a network of semi-autonomous local magnates who controlled the political, social, and economic structures of the villages, counties, and commanderies of the South.

Legacy of the Three States (Three Kingdoms)

The Three States period left a rich and complex legacy in history, literature, and popular culture. The official historical account of the period, Chen Shou's 陳壽 (233–297) *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (Records of the Three States; Treatises on the Three Kingdoms), was compiled during the Western Jin while Chen served as a minor official of that state. Chen Shou was a native of the Shu region, and was a student of the historian-scholar-official Qiao Zhou. It is generally regarded that Chen Shou began compiling the *Sanguo zhi* after the fall of Wu in 280, and completed it by 290. The work treats each of the three rival states in separate sections, but adopts the official calendar and titles of Wei, signifying the legitimacy of Wei as successor to the Han. Whether or not Chen Shou accepted Wei as legitimate, he likely had little choice in his presentation of the material. Since he served under the Jin dynasty which based its own legitimacy on having received the Mandate from Wei, to have presented either Shu-Han or Wu as the legitimate successor to the Han would be to deny the legitimacy of his own rulers—a dangerous proposition. The *Sanguo zhi* was not originally an officially sanctioned work, but was promoted to official status after Chen Shou's death. The work follows

the Annals–Biography format set by Sima Qian’s *Shiji* and Ban Gu’s *Hanshu*, though it lacks the treatises found in its predecessors. Despite criticisms of the work for its positive bias toward Wei, and treatment (or omission) of certain individuals, the *Sanguo zhi* is well-written and stands as the most important source for the period.

In 429, Pei Songzhi 裴松之 submitted his imperially commissioned commentary on the *Sanguo zhi* to Emperor Wen of the Liu-Song dynasty. Pei’s commentary quotes over 150 works from the period, including local and regional histories, gazetteers, and unofficial biographies that provide supplemental accounts of events and personages treated in Chen Shou’s base text. While some of the quoted materials are of questionable accuracy, Pei typically presents all surviving versions of an episode, and often adds his own view of which account should be regarded as credible. Pei’s commentary has circulated with the base text of the *Sanguo zhi* since the fifth century, and is a valuable resource for the study of the history of the Three States period.

The history of the period is also included in Sima Guang’s 司馬光 (1019–1086) *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Comprehensive mirror for aid in governing) and Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (1130–1200) later abridgment of the text, the *Zizhi tongjian gangmu* 資治通鑑綱目 (Outline of the comprehensive mirror for aid in governing). These two accounts present the events of the Three States period in an accessible chronological fashion.

Accounts of events and persons of the period had begun to spread outside of traditional historical writings by the Tang dynasty. Stories, plays, and vernacular accounts gained popularity, with the rulers and martial heroes of the third century morphing into archetypes of bravery, loyalty, wit, and treachery. The most influential of these later retellings of Three States history is the novel attributed to Luo Guanzhong’s 羅貫中 *Sanguo zhi yanyi* 三國志演義 (earliest edition dated 1494), literally, *The Extended Meanings of the Records of the Three States*, but popularly translated as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. While there are serious questions in regards to the authorship and dating of the text, its role in shaping later views toward the Three States period is significant. The novel takes great liberties with the historical record and promotes Shu-Han as the legitimate successor to the Han, presenting the state of Shu-Han and its founder Liu Bei as the heroes, with Cao Cao and Wei as the villains in an extended adventurous moral tale about duty (*yi* 義). Illustrated versions of the novel appeared in the Ming, and new media adaptations of the novel have continued to be produced, including comic books, television series, movies, and video games. As a result of these popular culture adaptations, the Three States period is one of the most well-known yet misunderstood eras in Chinese history.