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Rivalries at Red Cliff: Recasting Historical Figures in Modern Chinese Film and Television

Jackson Keys

When accomplished strategist Zhuge Liang (諸葛亮) visits the funeral of his bitter rival Zhou Yu (周瑜), he does something no one expects. Most of the attendees are loyal to Sun Quan (孫權), Zhou Yu’s lord who controls China’s southernmost provinces, and are well aware of the intense power struggle that ensued between Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang as the two cooperated in repelling Cao Cao’s (曹操) advances at Red Cliff. Zhou Yu attempted multiple times before and after the battle to have Zhuge Liang killed, and each time Liu Bei’s (劉備) brilliant strategist was one step ahead of him. Zhou Yu’s deathbed message, penned for Sun Quan, warns of the growing danger Zhuge Liang presents to Sun Quan’s hold on the south. Zhou Yu’s warnings proved correct and timely; it didn’t take long for Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang to begin carving out of Sun Quan’s lands a kingdom of his own.

It is for this reason that the funeral’s attendees are shocked when Zhuge Liang bows down in front of Zhou Yu’s coffin and weeps. “I weep for your untimely demise, head bowed, heartstcore,” the strategist says. “... You preserved your integrity with simple devotion, and it will survive the mists of death and time.”¹ The question of how sincere his words are is left for the reader to answer.

But his statement that Zhou Yu's legacy will "survive the mists of death and time" is undeniable, as the tale of these two rivals as written in the Ming dynasty novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三國演義), has been retold again and again well into the modern age.

In a modern world where *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* adaptations have expanded far beyond the world of drama and art—appearing in film, television series, video games, and collectible card games, just to name a few—it is to be expected that the canonized details of Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu's rivalry will be altered, or even reversed, to serve the interests of the re-tellers. By examining the ways that television and film adaptations of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* have depicted the relationship between Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu, two of the most iconic and memorable characters in the novel, it becomes clear that below the details of the rivalry a dynamic conversation between the opposing central and local powers of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is taking place; Zhuge Liang representing the centralized force of Beijing, Zhou Yu the localized force of low-ranked cadres and autonomous regions.

While a military victory for Sun Quan, whose armies are led by Zhou Yu, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* depicts Zhuge Liang as the true hero of the Battle of Red Cliff. The Battle acts as a turning point in the novel; it is Cao Cao's first major defeat and eventually leads to the creation of three warring kingdoms. As told in the novel, the very first instance leading to Sun Quan's involvement in the battle happens in a conversation between Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu. Uncertain of whether or not he should confront Cao Cao, Zhou Yu is persuaded to do so after Zhuge Liang cleverly instigates him by suggesting they pacify the northern warlord by sending him the two beautiful Qiao sisters. Zhuge Liang feigns ignorance of the fact that Zhou Yu is married to the younger of the Qiao sisters, and his trick works when Zhou Yu, furious at the thought of Cao Cao stealing his wife, resoundingly advises his lord to prepare for battle.

Although Zhou Yu agrees to work alongside Zhuge Liang and Liu Bei's forces to repel Cao Cao, he is all too aware of Zhuge Liang's cleverness and political ambition. Zhuge Liang's political ambition is vital to understanding the nature of their rivalry: Zhuge Liang is attempting to regain the central control of the dynasty for his lord, while Zhou Yu is attempting to hold onto his lord's local power in the south. Their rivalry becomes much more than two brilliant strategists trying to outplay one another; it is a battle that will determine

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2. Xiaofei Tian, *Halberd at Red Cliff: Jian'an and the Three Kingdoms* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018), 301.
whether the empire will be able to maintain central control over its land or let power stay within the hands of regional rulers.

This underlying power struggle was important to understanding the nature of Chinese history after the fall of the Han, but it is just as important to understanding the era in which Romance of the Three Kingdoms was written. Creating an empire that could unify “ten-thousand places” was important to the Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang (朱元璋), and even if it was never carried out to the extent of the Mongols, it was nevertheless an important part of Ming dynasty rhetoric. But the Ming court was well aware that no matter the size of their border, extending court authority over each local region within that border, especially those furthest from the capitol, was an incredibly difficult task. Zhu Yuanzhang borrowed much from Mongol communication technology in order to more fully extend centralized control over his empire, a prime example being the courier system. While this network of roads was able to rapidly increase the rate of communication and official movement across the empire, it was exploited by corrupt officials who found ways to use the system to benefit them, one example being a corrupt official who was punished in 1284 for using the system to procure prostitutes for him.

This form of corruption existing on the local levels of administration is a good example of a principal-agent problem that arises out of information asymmetries. To give another example from the Ming dynasty, magistrates were required every year to update the household data of the area they governed. While the central power, existing in the court, wanted this data to be accurate so their grain tax quota would accurately represent the population, the officials on the lower level were incentivized to fudge the numbers, subtracting a few here or there to create an appearance of fluctuation, to avoid the higher tax quotas their growing population would require. This information asymmetry made it extremely difficult for the court to extend its power over each local region. While the Ming may be remembered for a higher level of authoritarianism than many previous dynasties saw, there were strict practical limits on the distance that power could realistically be enforced.

5. This asymmetry and its relationship to PRC corruption is explored in great detail by Joseph Fewsmith in his book, *The Logic and Limits of Political Reform in China*. His arguments will become increasingly important later on in this paper to understand how modern *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* adaptations comment on CCP corruption.
With this push and pull between central and local power in mind, the rivalry between Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu becomes much more than a struggle between two ambitious military leaders. Zhou Yu is mainly interested in preserving Sun Quan’s power and autonomy; any personal reasons for his fear and/or jealousy of Zhuge Liang are less important than the fact that Zhuge Liang threatens Sun Quan’s regional hold on the south. Zhuge Liang’s main purpose throughout the entire novel is to recentralize China’s power in favor of Liu Bei, suggested by the novel to be the rightful heir of the Han dynasty. Zhuge Liang’s involvement in the Battle of Red Cliff is part of a greater plan to divide control of the empire into three kingdoms, the north ruled by Cao Cao, the south by Sun Quan, and the southeast by Liu Bei, after which Liu Bei will be able to play his opponents off of one another and gradually take control of the entire empire. The theme of reuniting the empire under a new central authority is vital to the novel itself. It is telling that the narrative continues many chapters after the death of the novel’s primary heroes including Zhuge Liang, ending finally with the lineage of Sima Yi reuniting the empire. If we view Romance of the Three Kingdoms as a novel that reflects the unifying dreams of the Ming dynasty, then the victory of Zhuge Liang over his rival Zhou Yu has much less to do with the former’s intelligence, and everything to do with the fact that Zhou Yu’s goal of maintaining regional autonomy is fundamentally opposed to some of the novel’s core themes.

The dream of unifying and centralizing Chinese rule has continued long past the Ming dynasty and well into the present day. Romance of the Three Kingdoms as a tale of reunification is as relevant today as it was when it was first written, perhaps even more so as the PRC wrestles with the difficulty of maintaining centralized authority. Television and film adaptations of Romance of the Three Kingdoms have proven to be some of the most ambitious and successful media projects of the post-Mao era, and the way they retell Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu’s rivalry says much about the unique times and circumstances each adaptation is created in. The first adaptation that attempted to retell the entirety of the novel was televised in 1994, a time when the importance of enforcing central power was burned in the recent memory of PRC leaders from events of the last decade.

Romance of the Three Kingdoms (1994) in post-Tiananmen China

The causes and consequences of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests have been examined in great detail by scholars of modern China. The demands of the protestors can be summarized well by a statement released when they began their...
hunger strike in May 1989: “our nation has come to a critical juncture: inflation is sky-rocketing, government corruption is rampant, power is in the hands of a few high-ranking officials, bureaucrats are corrupt, a large number of patriots have fled into exile, and social order grows daily more chaotic.” Early 1989 saw the cries against government corruption growing louder than ever before, though it is a problem that has existed in the PRC since its inception in the mid-twentieth century.

In his detailed analysis of corruption and reform in the PRC, Joseph Fewsmith argues PRC corruption often stems from the principal-agent problem between central authority and local officials mentioned above. The local officials, much like Ming dynasty magistrates, benefit from information asymmetries that allow them to increase their wealth and rank in a meritocratic system. While Beijing may endlessly attempt to reduce government corruption through a variety of programs, the promotion system that requires lower-level cadres to please those above them in order to advance consistently incentivizes bribery, which almost always goes unnoticed due to the information asymmetries. This promotion system quickly affects the lives of PRC citizens when a cadre’s desire to advance takes precedence over their goal of maintaining social security. This is the world in which students asked at Tiananmen Square and demanded reform, and although Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) violently silenced the protestors, their demand for reform was not forgotten, nor could it be if the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wanted to ensure another such protest never happened again.

This need for reform, if not to democratize then at least to lessen corruption, was reflected in the television of the mid-1990s. Many television dramas of this era can be categorized as anti-corruption dramas, a term coined by film scholar Ying Zhu. Anti-corruption dramas were filled with heroes, often emperors or magistrates in period pieces, who courageously battled against corruption and injustice. These dramas often engaged in a sort of historical revision. The popular series Yongzheng Dynasty (雍正王朝) took the life of the Yongzheng emperor, historically infamous for his neglect and often hostility towards the intellectual class, and created a drama focused on his tireless attempt to reduce and repel injustice in the empire. For the next decade or so, the television

industry was highlighting the evils of corruption, and at the same time implying to the viewers that something was being done to erase it in all levels of the PRC government.  

This is the world in which Wang Fulin's (王扶林) iconic 1994 drama, Romance of the Three Kingdoms, was televised. Television series based on different characters and events from the novel had been produced in both mainland China as well as Hong Kong in decades past, but no one had yet attempted to adapt the novel in its entirety. But by the early '90s, producing this kind of Three Kingdoms television series was not just demanded by the market — demand largely generated after the widely popular television adaptations of other literary classics such as Water Margins (水滸傳), Journey to the West (西遊記), and Dreams of Red Chambers (紅樓夢)—but a decision made by the central government who named the novel a “national historical treasure” and made sure that the project was free from overseas influence or investment. Wang Fulin was a suitable choice for lead director; he was a director of the very first Chinese television serial drama, Eighteen Years in the Enemy Camp (敌营十八年), in 1981, as well as the director for the 1987 television adaptation of Dream of the Red Chamber. Wang’s inspiration for his television adaptations came from observing the success of BBC period dramas, a vision that he quite fully realized with the immense success of both Dream of the Red Chamber and his subsequent Romance of the Three Kingdoms.  

The series was viewed and distributed throughout East Asia and beyond, reaching twelve other countries and a total audience of more than 1.2 billion people.

Romance of the Three Kingdoms (1994) stands out in its commitment to accurately depict the events of the novel and historical details of the era. The narrative preservation of the rivalry between Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu is no different, and both actors give believable performances. Wang Fulin makes good use of the visual nature of television in helping the audience feel the tension between the two rivals. Episode thirty-four, where Zhou Yu commands Zhuge Liang to

obtain 100,000 arrows or face execution, is a good example of this. When Zhou Yu formally discusses military preparations with Zhuge Liang, the two smile and laugh as though they were close friends. After the order to obtain the arrows is issued, Zhou Yu offers his rival ceremonial wine, continuing to smile and laugh as he wishes him luck. This simple interaction is a good example of how this drama differed from much of the anti-corruption drama discussed earlier; while the audience is not left to doubt who is good and who is bad, the interactions between those characters are filled with unspoken implications. In this scene, both Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu exemplify the Chinese phrase “人心隔肚皮” (different hearts in different breasts, meaning you can never tell what is going on in another's mind). Zhuge Liang is less a moral paragon, and more an adept navigator of political webs who can use them to further his centralizing ambition. This is not to say Zhuge Liang is looked down upon for this, but his character texture as a hero is remarkably different than many other heroes appearing on television screens of the '90s.

If we focus on the information asymmetries that give rise to corruption at the local level of the PRC government, we see Zhou Yu exemplifying this phenomenon in a variety of ways. While the general may never engage in corrupt behavior such as bribery, he frequently makes decisions that prioritize removing Zhuge Liang over the success of the upcoming battle. For example, Zhou Yu orders Zhuge Liang to lead a task force to burn Cao Cao's supplies, knowing full well that it is a suicide mission. When asked by politician and general Lu Su why he thought to send Zhuge Liang on such a mission, Zhou Yu replies that by allowing Cao Cao to kill Zhuge Liang, he will free himself of future troubles. When Zhuge Liang spreads a rumor to Zhou Yu that people think he is only capable of naval victories, Zhou Yu lets his pride get the best of him and decides to assume leadership of the raid himself. He only decides to call off the suicide mission after Lu Su reminds him to put the needs of his country first. Neither decision is made to protect his army, rather they are to secure his regional power and maintain his pride. In the eyes of contemporary viewers, Zhou Yu may become an even more dislikeable villain who parallels traits of corrupt or incompetent local officials in the PRC.

In a similar light, Zhuge Liang becomes an even more likable hero who exemplifies a more realistic solution to the problem of corruption than heroes such as Emperor Yongzheng of anti-corruption drama. (Though it should be

noted for pure interest's sake that Zhuge Liang and Emperor Yongzheng are both played by the fabulous Tang Guoqiang (唐國強). Rather than an idealized official with the ability to clean corruption, Zhuge Liang is an official with a complete understanding of political webs and the ability to use them to his advantage. By playing the same game Zhou Yu is playing, Zhuge Liang is able to further his Lord's goal of centralization and bring greater power to morally pure leaders such as Liu Bei and the other heroes of Shu. In this way, Romance of the Three Kingdoms (1994), by nature of talented actors and writers that stay true to the source material, may still appeal to an audience craving the anti-corruption ideal without neatly fitting into the genre itself.

A variety of reasons can be attributed to the great success of Wang Fulin's series, which received average ratings of around 60 percent. The drama's faithful adaptation of a culturally significant tradition, the attention to historical accuracy, the scale of production, and the quality of actors all resonated greatly with audiences of the time and ushered in a new wave of interest in all things related to Three Kingdoms.13 Whether by nature of the novel itself or by the insight of the producers, the television series did not simply connect with the audience through flashy imagery and exciting episodes, it faithfully depicted characters of the novel whose interpersonal conflict resonated with the most widely discussed social issues of the day.

Three Kingdoms (2010):
Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

By the mid-2000s, corruption in China was not something anyone could realistically eliminate. Although PRC officials declared victory over corruption in 2002, for many the reality of continued corruption, especially visible at the local level, only became more and more prevalent. Events such as the 2008 Weng’an riots are telling examples of the public unrest that can ensue when officials test the limits of the amount of corruption and deceit a population is willing to put up with. The proud fight against injustice applauded in the anti-corruption dramas could only carry steam for so long; eventually, the anti-corruption drama was out and replaced by what Ying Zhu calls the officialdom drama. She defines this type of series as one that “actually gives a new treatment

to official corruption, normalizing corruption as inevitable, just part and parcel of a bureaucratic system,” and series with this tone began to take over prime time the saw the anti-corruption drama had in the previous decade.\(^\text{14}\)

At the same time, a trend only slightly related to the dilemma of government corruption began to emerge. After the Qigong movement, ending with the persecution of Falun Gong in the late 1990s, China began to experience a grassroots Confucian revival that was well met by the PRC, who has increasing viewed the acceptance and promotion of Confucius as an important part of its push to extend its soft power.\(^\text{15}\) The promotion of Confucius at the government level is less a genuine adoption of Confucian principles (which will never replace Marxism’s place in current PRC ideology) and more a way for the PRC to consolidate aspects of Chinese tradition as part of their brand.\(^\text{16}\) This effort has given rise to the construction of Confucian institutes throughout the world, and even television series based on classic Confucian texts. Understanding these two quite seemingly unrelated phenomena set the stage for the type of Three Kingdoms adaptation that premiered on television in 2010 and is vital to understanding the way that it portrays Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu’s rivalry.

The first time Gao Xixi (高希希) was approached to direct a new television series based on Three Kingdoms in the late 2000s, he rejected the offer on account that the project itself was daunting and possibly disrespectful to the 1994 series, as well as the fact that he had never directed a series set in ancient China. The most historically distant series he had directed up to this point was a series set in Shanghai during the 1930s. When the second offer came, this time with a script proposal from actor Chen Jianbin who would end up depicting Cao Cao in the series, Gao Xixi accepted.\(^\text{17}\) The series, released in 2010 and given a shorter title than its predecessor, simply *Three Kingdoms*, broke the record for the most expensive television series produced in China up to that point.\(^\text{18}\)

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15. The discussion of Chinese film and soft power in the west is explored in great depth by Yanling Yang in the article “Film Policy, the Chinese Government and Soft Power” published in *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, Volume 14 Number 1.


17. “(三國) 剧一旦做客【——有约】” Baidu video, 00:07, https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%A7%98%E5%B8%8C%E5%B8%8C/10970569

Unlike Wang Fulin’s series more than fifteen years prior, Gao Xixi’s adaptation was less focused on directly adapting the source material, but rather using the characters and narratives to create a television series with even broader appeal than those before it. In an interview, Gao Xixi noted, “Three Kingdoms is mainly based on Romance of the Three Kingdoms (the novel), but not entirely, we took it as reference and also added our own ideology, we call it operating plastic surgery to Romance of the Three Kingdoms, but not gender changing surgery.”

In depicting the rivalry between Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu in this series, evidence of the creators ‘adding their own ideology’ is immediately present. For starters, Xiao Qiao (小乔), Zhou Yu’s wife, is given a much larger role than in Wang Fulin’s series. She convinces her husband to let her come with him to Red Cliffs, where she acts as a moral foil to Zhou Yu; encouraging her husband to rid himself of his ambition to kill Zhuge Liang. She goes so far as to protect Zhuge Liang after Zhou Yu sends officers to kill him after he changes the direction of the winds at the Seven Stars Altar by hiding him in her carriage. When Zhou Yu learns of this, he lashes out at Xiao Qiao, telling her to leave and never come see him again.

The implications of this plotline can be seen in a few different ways, the first being an attempt to make the series more marketable to a larger audience that includes women, thereby increasing the soft power the series can generate for the PRC. If this were the goal, it was no doubt successful as the series was released across East Asia and beyond, even going so far as to release dubbed versions in a few European countries. That is not even mentioning the overseas Chinese community, for many of whom this series was and is their first exposure to Three Kingdoms television. Xiao Qiao’s role also serves to develop similar themes that the 1994 Romance of the Three Kingdoms emphasized in Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu’s rivalry: the centralizing force rising above that of the local level. If Zhou Yu represents local power then watching him lash out at his wife multiple times only serves to depict him in a more negative light. Neither series attempts to demonize him, and both depict him having occasional heroic and strategic moments, but if asked which character the audience identifies with most, few would choose Zhou Yu, who repeatedly treats his wife poorly, over the resourceful and cunning Zhuge Liang.

In many ways, *Three Kingdoms* is always attempting to add *more* to the narrative. This can be largely attributed to the growing popularity of the officialdom genre mentioned above. If *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (1994) was beginning to step into the waters of officialdom drama long before the trend began by presenting a more nuanced narrative than most anti-corruption dramas, then Gao Xixi’s *Three Kingdoms* is more completely submerged in it by adding offering more narrative angles to characters including Zhuge Liang, Zhou Yu, and others. The inclusion of Xiao Qiao as mentioned above does just this, allowing the viewer to look deeper into Zhou Yu’s character and intertwine it with his struggle against Zhuge Liang. Minor characters, such as Lu Su (魯肅), are given more texture as well. An official who is usually one step behind both Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu in the novel, Lu Su’s own intelligence and strategic mind is put on display in *Three Kingdoms* as he attempts to aid both Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang in an effort to ultimately ensure this his lord Sun Quan is not outpaced by Cao Cao or Liu Bei’s growing influence. When Zhou Yu censures Lu Su for preventing Liu Bei from committing suicide after Guan Yu’s failure to kill Cao Cao, going so far as to question Lu Su’s loyalty, Lu Su explains that he intentionally tried to save Liu Bei’s life, knowing that were the warlord to die, Sun Quan would be ever more vulnerable to attack from Cao Cao.21

Whether these narrative additions add much to the narrative’s depth is debatable. Oftentimes, characters are more prone to explicitly describe their motivations and secret intentions than in previous adaptations. For example, after Zhuge Liang baits Zhou Yu into joining the war against Cao Cao, he is seen having a conversation with Lu Su in which Lu Su asks him whether he was truly unaware that Xiao Qiao was Zhou Yu’s wife or not. Zhuge Liang explains his intentions and says that he is willing to lie for a good cause. For a viewer that is less familiar with the source material and characters, this may help them immediately grasp the nuance, although it may also feel on-the-nose for long-time fans of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

The fundamental similarities between *Three Kingdoms*’ portrayal of the Zhuge Liang/ Zhou Yu rivalry and the portrayal in previous adaptations do little to further the discussion of the tensions between central and local powers in China other than to remind us that they have not disappeared, and likely never will. What the portrayal does uniquely suggest is that the Three Kingdoms narrative is becoming a part of the PRC’s attempt to consolidate traditional

Chinese culture into their brand and extension of soft power. The portrayal of Zhuge Liang and Zhou’s Yu rivalry, with its increased details and explicit explanation of motivations, more closely aligns the series with other popular dramas of the era. Three Kingdoms has never been solely adapted by China; Japan and Korea both have long histories of adapting the novel that continue to the present day. But few of those adaptations made outside of China are attempting to retell the entire series, the success of another series on this scale further places the “ownership” of the Three Kingdoms narrative in the PRC, an increasingly important task, especially when considering the nature of the relationship between the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, all of which may potentially claim ownership of parts of the Chinese cultural legacy.

Red Cliff: Rivalry Turned Friendship

Since Hong Kong was returned to the PRC in 1997, the identity and relationship between Hong Kongers and mainlanders have been complex and in flux. Hong Kong may be part of the PRC but enjoys a regional autonomy most other cities lack (though this is changing rather quickly in recent years). This history has instilled many Hong Kongers with a unique sense of national and ethnic identity. One native of Hong Kong, for example, identifies first and foremost as a Hong Konger, it being a more important distinction to them than their Han Chinese identity, especially as the Han Chinese identity becomes more and more intertwined with the political influence of the PRC. While many in Hong Kong maintain this distinction, it is vitally important to the PRC with their one-China policy that Hong Kong, as well as Taiwan, lose their regional autonomy and legitimate right of sovereignty in the eyes of the rest of the world.

As the power balance in the Chinese-speaking world shifts, the story of Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu’s rivalry is more topical than ever, especially to those in Hong Kong or Taiwan. It is in this world that the 2008 and 2009 films Red Cliff Parts I–II were released, and a case can be made that it contributes to either one or both sides of this Chinese power struggle. Directed by the legendary director John Woo (吳宇森) just a few years before Gao Xixi’s Three Kingdoms series, Red Cliff I–II are large scale war epics, over four and a half hours in total, that depict the battle of Red Cliffs from the beginning of Zhuge Liang’s

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22. Anonymous student at Brigham Young University in discussion with the author, February 2022.
intervention in Sun Quan’s court to Cao Cao’s final defeat. The films are a showcase of a media strategy led by the CCP to take renowned Chinese filmmakers from outside the mainland and include them in the world of mainland-produced cinema. The director is from Hong Kong, the film was filmed and produced in mainland China, and included among the actors are stars from Hong Kong, mainland, Taiwan, and even Japan.

If we examine this film in terms of generating the PRC soft power in the west, then it can be seen as yet another period piece that fails to gain the PRC substantial soft power. The film’s first part stands with a lifetime gross of just $627,047 in domestic markets. But interestingly enough, the film’s top market was Japan, where its lifetime gross is over 52 million, almost 6 million dollars more than the film grossed in China. The lesson gleaned from the box office is that a film need not be popular in the west for the PRC to potentially gain soft power from it. The film’s success in the Japanese market is an especially large victory for China, as the Japanese media market has been producing Three Kingdoms adaptations in great numbers for decades. The implications for a Hong Kong audience are even more profound; a film such as this sees a Hong Kong director, along with many of Hong Kong’s biggest stars such as Tony Leung, moving on to larger markets in the mainland, speaking Mandarin Chinese, and placing the cultural world of Three Kingdoms more firmly into the hands of the PRC. If we are to view the current political world of China as divided into three kingdoms; mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, then this film may symbolically unite them under the mainland kingdom.

If we look past the film’s success and further into its narrative, especially the way it modifies the previously discussed rivalry between Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu, Red Cliff may be telling a very different story. In this film, the feuds and mind games between Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu of previous adaptations are replaced by friendship. Despite a few jabs at one another during the beginning of Part I, the majority of these two films sees Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu—the latter played by Tong Leung (梁朝偉)—uniting their minds to fight against Cao Cao and win a heroic, moral victory. The film’s final minute does much to force the viewer to remember that Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu are, in fact, friends. Zhou Yu’s final words in the film, spoken to Zhuge Liang moments

24. Information from online database Box Office Mojo by IMDBpro: https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0425637/?ref_=bo_se_r_1
before they depart, are, "In this alliance, I found true friends. No matter what happens, this experience is engraved in my heart." It is a heartwarming ending that turns the original text, or any other modern film adaptations for that matter, on its head. This aspect of the film reveals much more than John Woo's desire to give Tony Leung a spotless starring role; it completely reverses the rivalry narrative we have discussed above with its theme of centralism. Xiaofei Tian in her book, Halberd at Red Cliff, suggests: "For a viewer who is sensitive to the mainland Chinese government's tireless promotion of Chinese unification and a nationalistic agenda and to the Hong Kong identity of director John Woo, [Red Cliff] becomes a sly commentary on a localist perspective as opposed to the grand discourse of the empire." With this interpretation in mind, these films become more than a simple revision of historical tradition, but reverse the centralism over localism theme that has prevailed in the story of Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu since the Ming dynasty. Whether or not this was John Woo's intent, his films are the first modern adaptations of the Three Kingdoms narrative to take the side of the autonomous locality and portray defending that autonomy as the moral obligation of the heroes.

While much of the audience is no doubt familiar with Zhuge Liang's character and motivations in the novel, the films throw most of it out the window by depicting the Battle of Red Cliff as an end to itself rather than the means for Zhuge Liang to increase Liu Bei's regional influence. As such, Zhuge Liang is depicted as a loyal ally of Zhou Yu, who is the real star of the battle. Zhuge Liang takes this loyalty so far as to abandon his lord, who decides to retreat before the battle begins, and chooses instead to continue offering his aid to Zhou Yu.

Red Cliff's Zhou Yu is substantially different from the Zhou Yu we have seen in past adaptations. He is not deceitful as in Romance of the Three Kingdoms (1994) or as prideful and angry as in Three Kingdoms (2010); he may actually be seen as much more akin to the moral paragons that starred in mid-'90s anti-corruption drama who fight against injustice and corruption. In a scene that never would have been placed in a pre-modern adaptation of Romance of

26. Tian, Halberd at Red Cliff, 338.
27. To be fair, it should be mentioned that later on in Part II, it is implied that Liu Bei never truly intended to retreat, and he returns for the final battle against Cao Cao.
the *Three Kingdoms*, Zhou Yu learns that Cao Cao's army is experiencing an epidemic and is pressured to use the opportunity to strike. In reply, Zhou Yu says, "This is a battle of honor. Even war must be fair." The decision almost leads to crisis when Cao Cao piles deceased soldiers on rafts that float to Zhou Yu's camp with the intent of infecting his army. Through the scene, Cao Cao's lack of morality as a leader contrasts sharply with Zhou Yu's strict moral code.

Without Zhuge Liang's goal of helping his lord reunite the empire, the only character who represents centralized power is Cao Cao. John Woo does much to make Cao Cao even more villainous than he was portrayed even in the novel. His lust is repeatedly emphasized throughout the film, both in his disdainful treatment of consorts as well as his longing for Xiao Qiao. Xiao Qiao's role in the narrative becomes much greater than in other adaptations, even more so than *Three Kingdoms* (2010). By Part II's climax, she has left Xiakou and journeyed to Cao Cao's forces where she gives herself up to Cao Cao, hoping to stop the impending battle, and the very last scene of the battle has a sort of Mexican standoff between the heroes and Cao Cao, who is trying to kill Xiao Qiao to spite Zhou Yu. With the inclusion of these details, Cao Cao, a corrupt warlord from the north hoping to conquer the self-ruled south, may parallel quite well with the PRC from the viewpoint of many Hong Kongers.

Although the reversal of roles in *Red Cliff* helps us better understand the role of localism in Hong Kong, remembering that the films are international collaborations that achieved international success leaves us wondering what the true legacy of the films is. Any 'sensitive viewers' that pick up on the films' reversal of the PRC's one-China policy are most certainly outnumbered by those that simply watched the films hoping to see more of John Woo's masterful kung-fu cinematography and consume more quality *Three Kingdoms* media. But even if the implications of Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu's found friendship are lost on most viewers, the films succeed in offering a new perspective on a story that has been retold since the historical Battle of Red Cliff was fought at the end of the Han dynasty, and perhaps generate some sympathy for a thriving southern locality that lost its autonomy nearly two centuries ago.

Conclusion

In each of the three adaptations analyzed, the relationship between Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu becomes much more than the backdrop of one battle in an epic cycle filled to the brim with others. Rather, everything leading up to the battle as well as the consequences of it depicts the larger forces of centralism and localism that are in constant war with each other. The years during and after the fall of the Han dynasty were chaotic and uncertain; it took centuries for another power to effectively control an empire on the same scale of the Han. The novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* reflects this chaos and uncertainty, but the book says much more about the time in which it was written than the era it was writing about. The Ming was an empire that pushed the limits of what a centralized power could do, but also realized the inherent limits of extending that power across a great distance. The struggle between Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu is representative of these contrasting forces, and the way their struggle ends only exemplifies how chaotic these forces can be when pitted against each other; Zhou Yu dies while attempting to preserve Sun Quan's power in the south, and Zhuge Liang, while greatly outliving his rival, dies without seeing Liu Bei's dream of reunification realized.

When adapting their story to the television screen, both Wang Fulin and Gao Xixi depict a similar push and pull between centralism and localism in the episodes that feature Zhou Yu and his endless attempts to best his rival. And similar to the novel, both television series come from a state that is actively attempting to increase its central power and realizing the difficult reality that entails, even in a modernized world where communication is faster than ever. Wang Fulin's 1994 series came just a few years after the Tiananmen Square Incident, a time when the government corruption largely caused by the interaction between central and local powers was a hot-button issue. Gao Xixi's series came years later when a growing majority realized that the corruption they saw was not about to vanish, and following the media trends of the time, it depicted an overtly complicated political web that the Zhuge Liang must navigate in order to accomplish his reunification goals while aiding Zhou Yu during the Battle of Red Cliff.

John Woo's *Red Cliff I–II*, by doing away with this politicking web created when central and local forces collide, creates a film that emphasizes the strength of local power when protected by allies Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang, and in the end, their moral union is enough to send Cao Cao, the central force, back to his home in the north. It is possibly a dream for Hong Kongers who wish to retain
local autonomy while facing greater political control from the PRC, possibly a decision to make the movie more marketable to a broader East Asian audience who get to see their favorite movie stars fight side by side in a battle against evil; either way, the reversal of the novel's narrative is significant in a world where the question of “what/where is China and who should control it?” becomes ever more important to answer.

As China continues to deal with internal corruption as well as expand its central and global influence, the story of the rivals Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu will likely continue to be retold on television screens, in movie theaters, and on smartphones. Whichever rival comes out on top will largely be the outcome of whether the PRC continues to follow the pattern of its Ming dynasty forebears and attempt to ever increase its central influence, or whether local forces, be they local cadres or disputed territories, will prove to make that goal impossible.