



關帝

KUAN TI: GOD OF WAR

In almost every house there is an altar on the wall containing a picture of Kuan Ti, the red-faced God of War. It always faces the entrance, for demons and evil spirits do not dare to enter into his presence. There is a story that once, in a provincial town, a troupe of itinerant actors were invited to give a performance at a large mansion some distance from the town. They were told to put on any performance they wished but on no account should it figure General Kuan. When they arrived at the house, the lights were on and a large banquet was in progress. People were milling around the gardens and all were enjoying themselves. The players began to entertain the guests who seemed to be very appreciative. However, as time went on, the actors grew more and more annoyed for they were offered no refreshments. Considering this a slight, the actors put on a piece featuring General Kuan. At the sight of him, there was a sudden gasp and everything disappeared. The actors found themselves alone in the grounds of a deserted mansion already overgrown with weeds. Only then did the actors realize that they had been hired to entertain an assembly of ghosts.

The role of Kuan Ti is not an easy one for an actor. It is unique in that it demands conformance to strict ritual. For ten days before performing, the actor must abstain from meat and sex. Before going on stage he must burn incense before a paper image which is then tucked into the head-dress. Once made up, the actor must not chat or joke. After the

performance the actor must again bow to the image before burning it and immediately wash his face. Only when he has removed the costume can he relax. This ritual is necessary for several reasons. Kuan Ti is not only a God but he is the greatest and most powerful God in the pantheon. When an actor is made up to look like Kuan Ti, he partakes of the same essence as Kuan Ti. The ritual abstentions are made to purify the body to make it a suitable 'locus' for the spirit of the God. It is a time of spiritual danger for the actor. The very first man to have been entered by the spirit of the God was the man who had caused him to be beheaded. That man did not survive the visitation.

Kuan Ti was, prior to his deification, a historical figure who lived from 162 to 220 AD. He was a mighty warrior of great repute and his story is told in one of the earliest Chinese novels, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. To understand his contribution to the following events it is necessary to sketch in the main outlines of the period.

The virtue of the Han dynasty, set up by a peasant rebel in 202 BC, had begun to run out. The young Emperor Han Huan was completely dominated by eunuchs whose insatiable greed placed heavy burdens on the people in the form of taxes. When society is off-balance the heavens reflect this. Natural disasters seemed to occur with unnatural frequency. There were earthquakes, plagues of locusts, floods and droughts. In response to these the people turned to health cults and other religious movements. The people began to organize. In 184 AD the strongest of these movements launched a rebellion. They called themselves the Yellow Turbans after the scarves they tied round their heads. This rebellion posed a major military threat to the emperor, who divided his army into two: one under the control of the eunuchs, the other under the military. These two factions clashed and the eunuchs lost. In revenge for the murder of the military commander-in-chief, 2000 eunuchs lost their heads. This occurred in 189 AD. When the reigning emperor died without a direct heir, a new emperor was found, but from now on he was to be a mere tool for a succession of warlords, the last of whom was Ts'ao Ts'ao (曹操).

Ts'ao Ts'ao was the most efficient and ruthless of them all. In one year

he rose from being a minister without a base or an army to a general with both. He did this by raising a contingent of 5000 men and, when he heard that Yen Chou in Northern China was being besieged by Yellow Turbans, he offered to rid the district of this scourge if they made him their 'protector'. They agreed and Ts'ao Ts'ao undertook such a successful campaign that 300,000 Yellow Turbans surrendered to him. He organized them into a disciplined army and was now a power to be reckoned with. His most famous words were "I would rather betray the whole world than let the world betray me".

The next 30 years was a time of chaos, of shifting allegiances and of military entrepreneurialship until gradually the situation resolved itself with a temporary division of the country into three kingdoms, each headed by a self-styled emperor. The three kingdoms were Wei in the north, Wu in the south and Shu in the west. This then is the background to the story of Kuan Ti.

The story starts in 184 AD when prefects and governors throughout China called for volunteers to fight against the Yellow Turbans. Three men met by accident and, discovering they were united by a common purpose, they decided there and then to enter the bond of blood brotherhood and pledge themselves to each other. They took the oath in a peach orchard and sacrificed a black ox and a white horse to sanctify the occasion. The three men were Liu Pei (劉備), Chang Fei (張飛) and Kuan Yu (關羽).

Liu Pei claimed to be an impoverished scion of the imperial family. His brothers accepted this claim and he was made the 'elder' brother. Presented as a man of honour, he nevertheless comes across as a weak man who was intelligent enough to recognize the fact. Perhaps his was the still centre of the archetypal Taoist ruler, as he attracted and maintained the services of many able people.

Chang Fei, the 'younger' brother was a butcher and wine seller by trade. A man of immense appetite, impetuosity and extravagant emotion, he is the embodiment of the fiery, unyielding upholder of justice.

Kuan Yu is an altogether more austere and powerful figure. From the very first moment he commands respect. He is the personification of

integrity. Nevertheless he remains enigmatic.

When these three met, Kuan Yu had been an outlaw for several years. One version of this story – which also explains the red face – goes like this:

One day, while passing the house of a neighbour, he heard the sound of weeping. He stopped to enquire the reason. Inside the house was an old man and his beautiful daughter. The old man told Kuan Yu, whose name at that time was Yun-chang, that the uncle of the local official wished to take his daughter as a concubine even though she was already engaged to be married. The official was intent on obtaining the girl for him. Yun-chang flew into a rage, seized a sword and rushed off to kill both the official and his uncle. He now had to flee and the only way out was through the T'ung Kuan mountain pass. As he was wondering how he would be able to get through without being recognized, he stopped to wash his face in a mountain stream. There he caught sight of his face, which had turned red. He presented himself to the officers at the pass knowing they would not recognize him, told them his name was Kuan, and got through. This story is actually based on an extended pun for 'Kuan,' which in the same tone can mean 'to observe', 'distressed', 'infirm', 'widower', 'official', 'coffin' and 'run a thread through the web'; and when he presents himself at the customs post and calls himself 'Kuan', a common enough surname, the same character also means 'to shut a door', 'a mountain pass' and 'a time of danger'.

The three brothers recruited and equipped 300 men and joined the wars where they made a small name for themselves. When the initial impetus of the uprising collapsed they retired with some small rewards.

It was not until some years later that Kuan Yu first came to wider notice. The occasion was a battle between the warlord Tung Cho, whose puppet the emperor was, and the army of 'loyalists' under general Yuan Shao. Liu Pei was accorded the honour of sitting at the general's table and his brothers stood in attendance. The champion from the opposing army was hurling challenges to combat and two captains were sent one after the other to deal with him. Both were killed. Yuan Shao called for

someone to take up the challenge but was taken aback when Kuan Yu said he would go. The contest of champions, like the European tradition of chivalry, was a contest of knights. It was an aristocratic affair. It was not for upstart 'archers'. Nevertheless Kuan Yu insisted, and when offered a stirrup cup (by Ts'ao Ts'ao) he told him to pour out the hot wine as he would be back soon. The wine was still warm when he deposited his opponent's head at the general's feet. Yuan Shao was not mollified but Ts'ao Ts'ao was impressed.

As the battle lines wavered and changed and alliances constantly shifted, Liu Pei and his brothers went from one patron to another; to all except Ts'ao Ts'ao. Kuan Yu proved himself at arms time and again with his sword Black Dragon and his horse Red Hare and it was his ability that Ts'ao Ts'ao wanted. Hoping to seduce Kuan Yu to his side, he developed a ruse which worked and Kuan found himself trapped halfway up a hillside. Knowing that he was quite prepared to die – "Death is only a return home" was his only comment on the prospect – a friend was sent to talk him over. He finally agreed to submit but only on three conditions: the most important of which was that he be allowed to rejoin Liu Pei if he heard news that he was still alive – this being in doubt at the time. The conditions were accepted but only because Ts'ao hoped to compromise him into staying with him. He attempted to compromise him in a hundred small ways. First he allocated Kuan Yu the same quarters as Liu Pei's wife and concubines, who had also been captured, but Kuan deflected this stratagem by standing outside their door the whole night holding a candle. Then Ts'ao bestowed on Kuan the rank of General, presented him with ten lovely serving girls and loaded him with presents of gold and silk. Finally he attempted to compromise him militarily by having him fight as a champion against the army of Liu Pei's patron. All to no avail. When news of Liu Pei did arrive, Kuan Yu left everything he had been given and, taking his sisters-in-law and his own body of personal guards, forced his way through six mountain passes. Throughout this entire episode he showed such a fine appreciation of his duties that even Ts'ao Ts'ao could not feel he had been deserted.

It was this that set him apart from the other heroes of the time. His military prowess, great though it was, was often equalled. One champion fought both him and Chang Fei together without retreating. He is not worshipped for his might but because he is the embodiment of 'right action', of integrity and of loyalty. He was set a stiff test and he came through without a blot on his reputation. This, at least, is the theory but one should add that his awesome reputation as a warrior is not a negligible element in the equation. It is really the fusion of 'might' and 'right' that led to his deification. Some say he is worshipped because he is the embodiment of the sacred principles of the *hsieh*, or knight. There is an element of this but chivalry in China had rather different principles to that of Europe.

The European chivalric tradition was bound up with tests of strength in jousts and tournaments, with romantic notions of illicit love and was wholly aristocratic in its perspectives, that is to say arrogant and ignorant. Battles were fought in a manner that went against good sense simply to conform with ideology. If it looked as though the pikemen and archers were likely to win without a cavalry charge, the knights would nevertheless charge and trample down their own army because a battle had to end with knights covered in glory. Glory is a very curious concept and quite absent from Chinese notions of chivalry. In China any man could rise to be a knight if he was able to afford or steal (?) a horse and weapons and if he had the necessary prowess. There were no romantic illusions concerning women and the idea of proving oneself for a woman was wholly foreign. Lastly, and most importantly, the Chinese knight did not feel that a personal test of strength had priority over victory. Stories of champions feigning retreat, or defeat, to lure an enemy into a trap litter the pages of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The knight was given his instructions by a strategist who could be, and usually was, low-born. Kuan Yu, 'brother' of Liu Pei though he was, scrupulously obeyed the orders of Liu Pei's commander-in-chief, Chuko Liang (諸葛亮), whose position did not depend on family connections but simply on his brilliance.

Chuko Liang, or Kung Ming to give him his more familiar names, at the age of 26 had acquired, without apparently doing anything, a reputation as a man of great wisdom. Liu Pei visited his cottage three times unsuccessfully in order to meet him and ignored Chang Fei's impetuous suggestion that they should simply send soldiers to drag him out. Kung Ming eventually agreed to help Liu Pei in his struggle and so effective was he that the strategist who opposed him, Chou Yu, died of frustrated impotence at the age of 36. His last words were "Oh God, since thou madest me, why didst thou also create Liang?"

By ruthless strategy Kung Ming pitted the men of Wu against the men of Wei and took the spoils of victory, Chingchou, as the territorial base for Liu Pei. He then appeased the aggrieved victor by saying that they had only borrowed this territory temporarily and would return it. From this base Liu Pei was invited into Szechuan, took that over and so, in effect, divided the country into three competing kingdoms.

Kung Ming seems to have also been something of a Shaman for he is often described as wearing a 'Taoist' cloak and conducting sacrifices. He was wearing such a cloak when, caught in a small town with only a handful of troops by a large force of the enemy, he opened the town gates and sat on the wall. Recognizing him, they immediately feared a trap and departed without offering combat.

It is interesting to note in the novel that as Kung Ming gains prominence Kuan Yu begins to drop out of sight. When the main army moved to Szechuan he remained in Chingchou. Something has been glossed over. It is only when events move inexorably towards his death that Kuan once again takes the centre of the stage. Was there jealousy or an estrangement? Was it that he was showing too much arrogance or independence to be useful to Kung Ming?

We are left to guess. It is more than likely that the intransigence of age was beginning to show. When Liu Pei was persuaded to style himself emperor in 219 AD, Kuan Yu was not present, though he was accorded high honours. Another hint that he was encouraged to lead a sedentary life lies in the fact that Liu Pei found him a wife, by whom he had a son

and a daughter. When asked to ally his family with that of the Sun's of Wu by giving his daughter in marriage, Kuan flared, "How can my tiger daughter marry with a dog's whelp?" This arrogant answer ultimately led to his downfall but not before he proved that at the age of 58 he had lost little of his spirit. Wounded by a poisoned arrow he allowed his arm to be cut open and scratched to the bone by a doctor while he played a game of chess, showing no sign of pain. Invited to dinner and knowing an ambush had been laid he nevertheless went alone and so petrified his host that the signal to attack was never given. However, he relied too much on his right arm and did not give enough thought to strategy. He was outwitted, captured and beheaded.

On the night that he died his spirit appeared to a venerable Buddhist priest who gave him brief instruction in the law. Kuan became the guardian spirit of that place. So ends his story according to the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which was written in 1394 or thereabouts.

His posthumous career however developed and by the seventh century his cult was sufficiently strong to be adopted by the Buddhists. In 1102 the Sung emperor, influenced by his Taoist advisors, received him into the official religion as Duke. In 1128 he became Prince and in 1594 he was promoted to Emperor and given the titles 'Great Emperor who Seconds Heaven', 'Great Emperor who Protects the State' and 'King of Military Pacification'. He was further raised in 1813 to 'Military Emperor' as he is personally supposed to have prevented the assassination of the emperor. At this time it was decreed that he was to be accorded honours equal to Confucius. They do seem to complement each other. Confucius is patron of internal harmony; and Kuan Ti, Emperor Kuan, is patron of the security of the frontiers from external threat – remarkably apt given his surname. It appears that temples, similar to those of Confucius, were built in all administrative districts of the empire and it was in these temples that the executioner's sword was kept. After an execution the magistrate would pray there "for fear the ghost of the criminal might follow him home." No malevolent spirit would dare enter Kuan Ti's presence.

Kuan Ti's way with demons and malefactors makes up in effectiveness

what it loses in subtlety. This is amply illustrated by the following story:

A rich man died young. While the family was still mourning him a magician arrived who said that he could bring the man back to life but would need a substitute who would be willing to die in his place. None of his wives appear to have been interested but an old servant did agree so preparations were made. The old man prayed to Kuan Ti, explaining his action, and then the ceremony began. Suddenly there was a great clap of thunder and the magician was struck dead by lightning. When his body was inspected it was found to have the following burnt on his skin: "Condemned by Heaven as a corrupter of religion, a destroyer of the law, who by changing bodies aimed at wealth is executed forthwith in accordance with orders received." The magician had meant to send his own spirit into the body.

This mention of 'orders received' is rather cryptic but may refer to the fact that the deed had not been done personally by Kuan Ti but by one of his assistants, who are normally referred to as assessors.

All trades, guilds or occupations have a patron God. Kuan Ti, or Kuan Kung, as he is often known, is patron not only of the military and of the Ch'ing Emperors but also of restaurants, pawn shops, curio dealers, of certain aspects of wealth and, curiously, of literature. He is said, in this context, to have been able to memorize an entire book at one reading. This last patronage is indeed strange and may be a sign that he was moving in on Confucius' territory, he being patron of bureaucrats and scholars. Kuan Kung is also tutelary guardian of all brotherhoods and secret societies such as Triad organizations, evidenced by his popularity among émigré Chinese communities, and in Hong Kong of the police force, especially the Criminal Investigation Department. Every C.I.D. office is graced with a large altar to Kuan Kung. It is a nice touch to have the triads and police praying to the same patron.

Kuan Ti's major festivals fall on the 15th day of the second moon and on the 13th day of the fifth moon; that is to say, in the centre of the central halls of Spring and Summer (see magic square). Green is the colour of spring, and red that of summer. Summer is the season whose

direction is South. South is the direction of life. The front door of a house is considered to face in this direction whether it actually does or not. Kuan Kung presides over the South; he is protector of the living and of the doors. If we look at his image we see that he is seated on a tiger skin; sometimes he has a tiger's face emblazoned on his chest. The tiger is the animal emblem of the West and of Autumn. Kuan Ti thus presides over the light half of the year.

Chang Fei, whose wide eyes stare out of a black face and whose bristling beard seems to add to the bristling ferocity of his expression, clearly represents the dark end of the year. If their two characters are anything to go by, Summer would appear to be a time of austerity and Winter a time of drunkenness and wild emotion. Chang Fei is said to have been murdered by his own subordinates while deep in a drunken stupor.

Liu Pei, the third of the trio, the one whose characteristics are most humane and moderate, is the embodiment of the Imperial ideal and thus has his place in the centre. It is he who is carrying the seal of Heaven's authority though he seems to be doing so on behalf of Kuan Kung.

Out of the history of an emperor designate we have a myth of the ideal ruler guarded by the forces of summer and to a lesser extent that of winter.

The story of Kuan Yu and his rise to Kuan Ti is the most illustrious example of an historical man's deification. This was one source of Gods, but by no means the only one.

I have called Kuan Ti 'God of War'. This is how he is commonly referred to by English writers on Chinese mythology. It is not a very accurate label. He is no bellicose war-mongering god. If anything his label should be 'God who defends the state, civilization and morality'.



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