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Fusek/The Three Sui Quash the Demons’ Revolt

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When I first read this novel, I knew only that it was attributed to Luo Guanzhong, who is thought to have died sometime after 1364, and that Luo is also said to have been the author of two of China’s greatest novels, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margin*. I knew, moreover, that there were two versions of *The Three Sui Quash the Demons’ Revolt*: the twenty-chapter novel said to be by Luo and a forty-chapter version first published in 1620 by Feng Menglong (1574–1646). Feng attempted to resolve what he considered the inconsistencies of the shorter work and to give it the polish expected of literary works in his time. His revision was so popular that it virtually erased all trace of the Luo novel, and the twenty-chapter version became a rare book until recently. Why then have I not translated Feng’s forty-chapter version? Although the twenty-chapter novel is so loosely put together that it can be considered a novel only in the broadest definition of the term, I nevertheless found the ironic, witty tone of the narrator and the comic buffooneries in the action very entertaining. The work had such a plucky quality that I found I much preferred it to the more refined forty-chapter version. Of even greater importance, I suspected that there was more going on in the shorter version than first met the eye.

It is striking how the novel continues to evoke the image of the rise and fall of dynasties. Although it concerns a heterodox rebellion that took place in 1047–1048 during the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), the story as told contains allusions to the Han dynasty, both to its founding in 206 BCE and its fall in 220 CE. And, too, the novel is attributed to Luo Guanzhong, about whom little is known except that he probably lived some three hundred years after the rebellion, making him a likely witness to the fall of the Yuan dynasty (1260–1368) and the founding of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Further the only extant text of the novel attributed to Luo dates to a “republished” edition issued around 1600 some 250 years after Luo’s death. The early 1600s were a
time when sectarian revolts were spreading across China, creating a serious threat to the survival of the Ming dynasty. In 1620 Feng Menglong published his revised version of the novel and a mere twenty-four years later, the Ming dynasty came to an end.

The novel is based on an actual uprising in the city of Beizhou in Hebei Province between 1047 and 1048. It was led by Wang Ze, a garrison soldier with the rank of corporal. Wang proclaimed himself the ruler of Beizhou and established an administration based on the imperial model as he made plans to extend his kingdom into the surrounding territories. Wang declared that he was acting in the name of the Maitreya Buddha, the future buddha whose promised appearance was going to restore a sinful world to the path of goodness. There were many such heterodox revolts in the history of China, particularly in times of social and economic unrest. Centuries of experience had taught that if these religious movements were allowed to grow and spread, they could (and often did) bring down the reigning dynasty. Although the emperor sent his best generals and crack troops against Wang Ze, they were unable to subdue him and his adherents until Wen Yanbo (1006–1097), a promising military and civil official, assumed command of the siege. He succeeded in capturing Wang Ze, who shortly thereafter was executed. Was Wang Ze a true believer or a cunning opportunist? The historical record contains many details, but history is set down by the winners. Of the losers we know little or nothing at all.

The tale as told in the twenty-chapter novel is a strange mix of fact and fiction. The first half of the novel is concerned with the flight from the law of various miscreants, who all somehow find themselves in Beizhou with Wang Ze. The second half deals with the Pellet Priest’s flim-flam of Grand Commandant Bighearted Wang and the uprising itself. The characters are representative of the types of people who were drawn to such popular religious movements: vagabonds, peddlers, disaffected clergy, ordinary soldiers, and so on. Here and there the names of certain characters accord with the historical Wang Ze story. Thus Zhang Luan and Bu Ji, who were two of Wang Ze’s real-life lieutenants, appear as a mysterious Daoist priest and a comical peddler. And two historical figures with the given name Sui who helped Wen Yanbo defeat Wang Ze have been joined by a third, fictional Sui, thus giving us the three Sui of the title. In the novel’s version of the revolt itself, well-known historical figures are eliminated from the action in favor of two unknowns, Liu Yanwei and Sun Fu. Then there are misplaced historical figures. Cao Wei (973–1030), who helps Wen Yanbo win the day, was a real enough individual, but he died seventeen
years before the uprising. Even the renowned Judge Bao, who is depicted as the prefect of Kaifeng in the novel, could not have been there because the historical revolt took place ten years before Bao became the prefect of Kaifeng. No wonder Feng Menglong decided on a rewrite!

But perhaps Feng missed the point, and the inconsistencies were neither careless nor unintended.

The novel is written in the vernacular, as opposed to the classical or literary language, but it is not mere plain speech, for it is written with great style and verbal flair. And in keeping with the prescribed form for a vernacular novel, which is said to derive some of its unique features from the performance style of the oral storyteller, chapters open with a couplet sketching the action to come, followed by a rhymed quatrain, either borrowed or invented to suit the situation. The narrative is punctuated by a number of set pieces in parallel prose, sometimes introduced by the formula “Just see …” or “Just look. …” The narrator frequently addresses readers to comment on the events taking place or to switch the action to a different scene. Each chapter concludes with the repetition of a standard formula: “Hear the tale that continues below!”

But if we eliminate the arbitrary chapter divisions and simply view the narrative as an uninterrupted flow, a different organizational pattern begins to emerge. It becomes clear that the twenty-chapter *The Three Sui Quash the Demons’ Revolt* was not so much written as it was compiled. The novel is an arrangement of six self-contained vernacular stories or *huaben* that undoubtedly predate the novel. No one story bears any intrinsic relationship to any other story. Any and all of them, with the exception of the core story concerning the Three Sui and Wang Ze, may be eliminated entirely or replaced with another similar story without damage to the sense of the novel as a whole. If the names of a few characters were changed, the transitional matter removed, and the conclusions to the original stories restored, the novel would appear to be an anthology in which only one story deals with the Wang Ze rebellion. I have given these vernacular stories my own titles: “Rags to Riches and Riches to Rags” is the story of a wealthy pawnbroker whose only daughter turns out to possess magic powers; “The Would-be Seducer” is the story of a fresh young fellow who gets his comeuppance; “The Eight-sided Well and The Golden Caldron” is the story of a Daoist priest who rescues a peddler from the clutches of a venal magistrate; “The Three Goodly Chuckleheads” is the story of a baker, a butcher, and a noodle-maker who presume to master the magic arts; “Grand Commandant Bighearted Wang Gets Bilked” is the story of a wily Buddhist
priest who matches wits with Prefect Bao and wins; and the core story, “The Three Sui Quash the Demons’ Revolt,” is the story of the Wang Ze rebellion. Although separate stories have been found from time to time embedded in Chinese vernacular fiction, this piecing together of ready-made stories to form a complete novel is, to my knowledge, unique.

Given such an unusual structural framework, we might presume that the novel was slapped together willy-nilly. But this is not the case. Although “Rags to Riches and Riches to Rags” and “The Eight-sided Well and the Golden Caldron” each combine two stories, in both cases the two stories are melded together to form a single story, and hence in the novel there are six stories. “The Would-be Seducer” and “The Three Goodly Chuckleheads” serve as comical interludes, while the remaining four tales are all concerned with court cases and bringing the guilty to justice. References to particular hexagrams in The Book of Changes give a sense of the passage of time and increase the urgency of the ongoing situation. Sections of text and images borrowed from The Water Margin highlight the close relationship between the two novels. Magic is the common focus in the stories. How else could a motley band of rebels presume to challenge the orthodox establishment except by the illicit use of the powers of darkness? Furthermore, as the establishment would have it, the practice of magic ensures the fanatics’ inevitable downfall, for such heretical practices and beliefs are, by definition, barbaric and debased.

The twenty-chapter novel is attributed to Luo Guanzhong, but is he responsible for compiling the novel as we have it? Probably not. According to the novel’s preface and other evidence, it was put together some time between 1571 and 1589, during the Ming dynasty, some 200 years after Luo Guanzhong’s death and only a few decades before Feng revised it into the forty-chapter version. The author of the preface, Tong Changzuo, gives great credit for the novel to one Wang Shenxiu, although Tong is rather vague as to what we are to credit Wang for. Either Wang used materials that were believed to have been written by Luo, or Wang was following in the tradition of Luo as an author of vernacular fiction, or both. But even if Luo did not compile the novel as we have it, his authorship of one or more of the stories cannot be completely dismissed, although it also cannot be proven. Nonetheless, it may be said with confidence that the novel derives much of its purpose and meaning from its close association with Luo’s works. The notion of the three Sui is directly related to The Romance of the Three Kingdoms, and the twenty-chapter novel is an obvious parody of Water Margin.
The Three Sui Quash the Demons’ Revolt, for all its zany antics, seeks to demonstrate the age-old maxim that the end does not justify the means. Seeking redress for suffering and injustice is not to be accomplished through violence. It is equally reprehensible to use popular religion and heterodox practices to sway the masses to revolt in the hope of a better life. There can be no lack of vigilance in eliminating movements that advocate such things wherever and whenever they occur. The ultimate goal is a well-ordered society, and to accomplish this the government must promote the welfare of the people and eliminate corruption and venality from its midst. At this level the novel is a Confucian idealist’s cry for reform. But the last story, the story of the rebellion, strikes a more subversive note, for embedded within it is a warning that it is already too late. At the time the twenty-chapter novel appeared, the Ming dynasty was already doomed, and it had been doomed from the start precisely because it manipulated its way to power in the same fashion that Wang Ze attempts to do, by taking advantage of a frenzy of religious activity that swept the country at the time of the founding of the Ming in the mid-fourteenth century. Violent means can only beget violent ends. But of this more will be said later.

How, we may ask, can an unusual novel put together some 400 years ago about a revolt that took place almost 1,000 years ago possibly have relevance for today’s readers? But do we not find ourselves in a similar fix? Is our world not beset with violence of every kind and description? Are we not daily witnesses to armed and bloody struggles between revolutionaries and reformers, terrorists and moderates, the heterodox and the orthodox, all striving for ascendancy in the name of self-proclaimed righteous causes? We may or may not agree that the end does not justify the means or that violent means beget violent ends, but certainly we can understand and appreciate the profound distress that prompted the creation of The Three Sui Quash the Demons’ Revolt.