An Introduction to the End of Hàn and the Three Kingdoms
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Abstract
This is a general introduction to one of the most mythologized periods in Chinese history, the end of the Hàn dynasty and the Three Kingdoms (189 – 280). It seeks to provide a simple overview of the time period for non-specialists and beginners while assuming minimal background knowledge.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS
All Chinese words and names are transcribed using pīnyīn, the International Standard for transcription from Chinese into the Latin alphabet. However, pīnyīn was originally developed within China for internal use by Chinese speakers, and consequently pīnyīn does not use the letters of the Latin alphabet in the exact same way as English or any other language. As a full lesson on pīnyīn is outside the scope of this paper, the reader is encouraged to seek further information on pīnyīn from other sources.

Though many works drop tonal marks for convenience, it is of the opinion of this author that the value of disambiguation by tone marks is more than worth any cost in convenience. Furthermore, inclusion of tone marks also disambiguates between transcriptions of Chinese words and similarly spelled English works, such as “dǒng” vs “dong.” Chinese characters will not be used in the main text of this paper, to simplify reading for the layman.

1.2 CHINA
China is one of the largest and most populous countries in the world, and heir to one of the oldest continuous civilizations in recorded history.

Traditional Chinese historiography organizes time periods by dynasty, or more precisely the state name (guó hào) declared by the ruling family. As state names are often repeated, historians sometimes add an additional prefix for disambiguation, such as a cardinal direction referencing relative location of the capital, or “former” or “later” referencing order in time. A summary overview of Chinese history organized by time period and dynasty is given in Figure 1. For simplicity, it does not include the mythical Three Augusts

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1 For an analogy, consider that the Spanish pronunciation of “Los Angeles” differs from English pronunciation despite identical spelling.
2 For more information on pīnyīn, see language education resources such as the Chinese pronunciation wiki or Yabla.
3 Characters may be used in some figures and illustrations, where their presence is less intrusive.
and Five Emperors before the Xià, or the Republic of China and People’s Republic of China that formed after the Qīng.

1.3 Why Three Kingdoms?
Out of the approximately three thousand years of recorded Chinese history and the downfall of some twenty major dynasties (and many, many more “lesser” dynasties) why should a time period of less than a century (189 – 280) concerning the downfall of Hàn and its three claimant successor states have received such attention?

The fourteenth century novel Sānguó Yānyì, translated as Romance of the Three Kingdoms in 1925 by Charles Henry Brewitt-Taylor, has certainly contributed to the time period’s appeal, but certainly did not create it. Its own existence is itself a product of the time period’s appeal, for though Sānguó Yānyì did make original contributions, the work is primarily a compilation of over a millennium of older myths, plays, operas, and stories created about the time period.

Much of what is “known” about the period is, therefore, in fact not based on historical records, but on the inventions of later playwrights and storytellers in the intervening centuries. However, even when the later myth and romance is stripped away and the original historiographies studied, there is still some wonder to be found. After all, why else did so many mythmakers write on this time period in particular, if there was not something already there to inspire them?

One strand in the answer may be in the severe trauma of the collapse of Hàn and its divided legacy. The Hàn Empire was a golden age of civilization, comparable to the Roman Empire on the other side of the Eurasian continent, and its downfall naturally invites speculations on how a great and powerful Empire can fall from such heights, and what should happen afterwards. As Dr. Rafe de Crespigny notes:

*If, however, we look precisely at the end of Han, we must recognise that the fall of the unified empire was followed by four hundred years of political division: an age as long as the Han dynasty itself. The fall of Han was absolute, and it required a different combination of circumstances for Sui and Tang to restore the unity which had been lost for so long.*

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4 The more common phrase “five thousand of history” is a mistranslation/misunderstanding. The sum of five thousand is achieved by including pre-history and pre-civilization cultures.

5 Of the main sources on early Chinese history, the Four Early Histories: the Shí jì (SJ) of Sīmǎ Qiān, the Hàn shū (HS) of Bān Gù, the Sān guó zhì (SGZ) of Chén Shòu, and the Hòu Hàn shū (HHS) of Fàn Yè, the SGZ and HHS serve as the main source of information on the rise and fall of Hàn and the Three Kingdoms.

6 This rendering of the title has problems but has stuck in popular culture. The more recent 1991 translation by Moss Roberts renders the title instead as *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel.*

7 The Sānguó Yānyì is considered one of the Four Classic Novels of Chinese literature.

8 Too much comparison should, however, be discouraged, as the two polities evolved in different environments and under different circumstances. For example, Hàn did not have an internal sea to facilitate water transport, and therefore built a more extensive canal system than Rome; Rome therefore built a more extensive road system.

9 From his lecture “Man from the Margin: Cao Cao and the Three Kingdoms,” the fifty-first George Ernest Morrison Lecture in Ethnology 1990, which is also a wonderful introduction to the subject material.
This utter breakdown of social order meant opportunity for enterprising heroes to strike out on their own and rise higher than they could have ever hoped for under a strictly controlled Empire, as de Crespigny notes:\textsuperscript{10}

So I suggest this is one reason why tales of the Three Kingdoms have remained so strongly embedded in the popular culture of China: beside the excitement and imagination of the stories themselves, there is the memory of one brief moment when some individuals could seize their opportunities and break through the barriers of class and clan.

Cao Cao, indeed, was a model of the process. When he was young, a celebrated judge of character described him as:

\begin{quote}
A bad subject in time of peace, a hero in time of trouble.
\end{quote}

As a man of character and enterprise, he would have remained restricted and frustrated in an organised society. It was the ruin of empire which brought opportunity, and he and his fellows were no longer small fish in a well-controlled pond, but dragons in mighty waters.

\begin{quote}
It was a moment of personal liberty which was not maintained, but the legend has been admired by the oppressed of every generation since that time, and the heroes of that age have been taken as examples of those who controlled their own destiny.
\end{quote}

So, there was tragedy as well in the stories of these heroes. Their very successes in restoring order led to a return to the old ways of class and clan, and as the chaos receded the old established powers eventually usurped and removed the upstarts who had risen up from the chaos, leaving only the stories and legends.

To give a third and final word to Dr. Rafe de Crespigny:\textsuperscript{11}

\begin{quote}
Why should we be concerned with the history of men and events so long ago? I suggest, with appropriate caution, three strands for an answer: the literary style is better; the bloodshed is further away; but the lessons are as enduring as the people of China.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
Figure 1. The Dynasties and Time Periods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Dynasty</th>
<th>Start Year</th>
<th>End Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>夏 Xià</td>
<td>[~2000 BC – ~1600 BC]</td>
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<tr>
<td>商 Shāng</td>
<td>[~1600 BC – 1046 BC]</td>
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<tr>
<td>西周 Western Zhōu</td>
<td>[1046 BC – 771 BC]</td>
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<tr>
<td>東周 Eastern Zhōu</td>
<td>[770 BC – 256 BC]</td>
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<tr>
<td>春秋 Spring and Autumn</td>
<td>[770 BC – 476 BC]</td>
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<tr>
<td>戰國 Warring States</td>
<td>[476 BC – 221 BC]</td>
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<tr>
<td>秦 Qin</td>
<td>[221 BC – 206 BC]</td>
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<tr>
<td>六朝 Six Dynasties</td>
<td>[220 – 589]</td>
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<tr>
<td>三國 Three States</td>
<td>[220 – 280]</td>
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<td>魏 Wèi</td>
<td>[220 – 265]</td>
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<td>蜀漢 Shǔ Hàn</td>
<td>[221 – 263]</td>
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<td>吳 Wú</td>
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<td>六朝 Six Dynasties</td>
<td>[220 – 589]</td>
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<tr>
<td>南北朝 Southern and Northern Dynasties</td>
<td>[420 – 589]</td>
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<tr>
<td>宋 Sòng</td>
<td>[420 – 479]</td>
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<td>齊 Qí</td>
<td>[479 – 502]</td>
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<td>燕 Liáng</td>
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<td>東吳 Eastern Wu</td>
<td>[534 – 550]</td>
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<td>西魏 Western Wei</td>
<td>[535 – 557]</td>
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<td>[557 – 589]</td>
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<td>五代十國 Five Dynasties Ten States</td>
<td>[907 – 979]</td>
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<td>[907 – 923]</td>
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<td>金 Jin</td>
<td>[1115 – 1368]</td>
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<td>[1127 – 1279]</td>
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<td>北宋 Northern Song</td>
<td>[960 – 1127]</td>
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<td>南明 Southern Ming</td>
<td>[1644 – 1662]</td>
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<td>明 Ming</td>
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<td>北元 Northern Yuan</td>
<td>[1368 – 1388]</td>
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<td>明 Ming</td>
<td>[1368 – 1644]</td>
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<tr>
<td>南明 Southern Ming</td>
<td>[1644 – 1662]</td>
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<tr>
<td>清 Qing</td>
<td>[1636 – 1912]</td>
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Note: The table above lists the dynasties and their corresponding time periods in Chinese history, from the Shang Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, with specific emphasis on the Xia Dynasty (夏 Xià [~2000 BC – ~1600 BC]) and the Qin Dynasty (秦 Qin [221 BC – 206 BC]). Each dynasty is listed with its precise time span, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of Chinese historical periods. The table also includes notes on the periods such as the Three Kingdoms (三國 Three States [220 – 280]) and the Six Dynasties (六朝 Six Dynasties [220 – 589]), providing a detailed overview of Chinese history.
2.1 The Legacies of the Emperors Huán and Líng (146 – 189)

Later stories placed a great deal of blame for the downfall of Hán on Emperor Huán (r. 146 – 168) and Emperor Líng (r. 168 – 189), but the Empire was already in decline by the time they ascended the throne. From a larger perspective, Hán as a whole was suffering from problems seen in many late stage Empires: powerful and wealthy gentry families prevented the central government from enforcing strict control over local interests and taxation, leaving the government lacking in funds just as it was facing the heavy costs of an over-extended military defending expansions made during more prosperous times, which in turn led to increasing tax burdens on already struggling peasant farmers.

Meanwhile, in the capital of Luòyáng, the central government was weakened by a lack of longevity of its Emperors; no Emperor of Hán after Emperor Míng (r. 58 – 75) had lived past forty. Following tradition and precedent, a deceased Emperor’s principal wife and Empress and her male relatives dominated the regency over the next child Emperor; their power was such that in cases where an Emperor died without an heir, the Empress claimed the authority to choose a male-line cadet of the Imperial Family to adopt as a son and the next Emperor. For the final decades of Hán, the court and capital were dominated by these consort families, and at each generational transition there was political maneuvering and coups, with one consort family overthrowing the next, creating problems for government continuity.

In 159, Emperor Huán ended the cycle by destroying his overly powerful regent Liáng Jì, but did so by relying entirely on the eunuchs in the service of the Imperial harem and Palace. Political factions of gentry families resented and protested the resulting empowerment of the eunuchs, and in retaliation the eunuchs and the Emperor proscribed them from office. When Emperor Huán died without an heir in 168, there was some hope among the gentry for a restoration through the regency of Dòu Wǔ and Chén Fán over the adopted child successor Liú Hóng, but the eunuchs were sufficiently entrenched to strike first, killing Dòu Wǔ and Chén Fán and maintaining their hold over the future Emperor Líng and the government.

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12 Emperors are usually identified by posthumous names, bestowed after death as a summary and judgement of their lives and reigns. Emperor Huán’s personal name was Liú Zhì (132 – 168), and has annals in HHS 7. Emperor Líng’s personal name was Liú Hóng (156 – 189), and has annals in HHS 8.
13 The standard history associated with Later Hán is the HHS of Fàn Yè. See also Rafe de Crespigny’s Fire Over Luoyang, which provides a general history of Later Hán in English.
14 Later Hán reached its greatest extent during the reign of Emperor Hé (r. 88 – 105), where ambitious military action broke the strength of the Xiōngnú Confederation in the modern Mongolian steppe and restored hegemony over the Western Regions in the modern Tarim basin. In the long-term, the heavy costs of maintaining this expansion ultimately proved beyond Hán’s resources. Emperor Hé has annals in HHS 4.
15 For an excellent discussion on the Empire’s growing problems of inequality and difficulties in managing revenue and expenditure, see Rafe de Crespigny “Problems of Finance,” Fire Over Luoyang, 190-199.
16 Liáng Jì has biography in HHS 34. The posthumous name Huán, which has connotations of power and conquest, was probably given in reference to his destruction of the Liáng family.
17 Dòu Wǔ (d. 168) has biography in HHS 69; his daughter was Empress to Emperor Huán. Chén Fán (d. 168) has biography in HHS 66.
Emperor Líng was not an effective ruler.\textsuperscript{18} He came to the throne as a child and grew up under the care and tutelage of the eunuchs, so that he had little knowledge of the situation of the Empire at large.\textsuperscript{19} Before his adoption and enthronement, he had grown up poor, so that when he became Emperor he engaged in personal hoarding of money and greatly expanded the selling of government offices, further disrupting government continuity and damaging its authority. While proscription of factions opposed to the eunuchs continued in the capital, commanders on the northern and western frontiers suffered serious defeats, and to cap it all off, epidemics broke out across the Empire during the 170s.

Amid the epidemics, several faith healers and heterodox cults appeared in various locations,\textsuperscript{20} but the cult of the faith healer Zhāng Jué would have the most immediate and widespread consequences. In 184, he led what became known as the Huángjīn, or “Yellow Headscarves” Rebellion.\textsuperscript{21} The Imperial government reacted swiftly and crushed the greater part of the rebellion within a year, but the internal damage had been done and large parts of the Empire remained in unrest.\textsuperscript{22} Though the proscription of gentry factions from government office was ended in order to seek their help in putting down the rebels, the damage to mutual political trust had been done.

In that same year of 184, just as the Yellow Headscarves rebellion was being put down, the Empire suffered another disaster as garrisons in northwestern Liáng Province mutinied.\textsuperscript{23} For the next few decades the entire northwest, and the lucrative Silk Road trade that passed through it, was lost to Hán.

Amid such growing problems, a change was made to local government structure in 188. Previously, the heads of provinces were Inspectors (cìshǐ), who were actually ranked below Administrators (tàishòu), the heads of prefectures, the next smallest administrative unit. This system of a lower ranking official supervising but not commanding a higher prevented the heads of provinces from gaining too much power, but also limited their ability to react to emergencies. In select provinces containing troubled areas, Inspectors were replaced with Governors (mù), who held executive authority and outranked the Administrators. This however meant a higher degree of autonomy for the province, and the central government faced greater difficulty in controlling a powerful Governor.\textsuperscript{24}

In the early summer of 189, the Emperor Líng suddenly fell ill and died, the tenth ruler of Hán in a row to die before the age of thirty-five. He left behind a troubled Empire, a Court divided between rival factions of eunuchs and gentry, and a potential succession dispute between two sons.

\textsuperscript{18} The posthumous name Líng is negative, associated with ineffectiveness and incompetence. See the annals of Emperor Líng in HHS 8 and de Crespigny “The Government of Emperor Líng,” \textit{Fire Over Luoyang}, 388-397.

\textsuperscript{19} See the biographies of eunuchs in HHS 78.

\textsuperscript{20} The \textit{Diānlüè} of Yú Huàn mentions Lù Yáo, Zhāng Jué, and Zhāng Xiū as examples. See the annotations to SGZ 8.

\textsuperscript{21} They were so named for the yellow strip of cloth they tied around their foreheads for self-identification. Older translations use “Yellow Turbans,” but this rendering is potentially misleading as to the appearance of the cloth strips. For an account of the rebellion, see de Crespigny “Yellow Turbans,” \textit{Fire Over Luoyang}, 402-417.

\textsuperscript{22} Groups calling themselves Yellow Headscarves would appear again and again for decades, though the degree of relation to Zhāng Jué’s original Yellow Headscarves probably varied a great deal.


\textsuperscript{24} For a discussion of Governors and Inspectors, see Bielenstein, \textit{The Bureaucracy of Han Times}, 90-92.
Figure 2. The Hán Empire
2.2 THE END OF IMPERIAL AUTHORITY

The elder son of Emperor Líng, Liú Biàn, was born of the Empress, lady Hé, and about seventeen at the time.\(^{25}\) The younger son, Liú Xiè, born of a lesser consort, was about eight. Though Emperor Líng had professed doubts on Liú Biàn’s suitability and favored Liú Xiè, he had made no official decision before his death, and Liú Biàn’s succession was enforced by the Empress Hé and her elder brother the General-in-Chief Hé Jín.\(^{26}\) Opposition groups were rooted out and killed.\(^{27}\) Hé Jín allied with the Yuán family of Rǔnán, a powerful gentry clan that had occupied the highest levels of the Imperial bureaucracy for four generations,\(^{28}\) and two leading heirs of that family, Yuán Shào and Yuán Shù,\(^{29}\) became key lieutenants to Hé Jín. The gentry supporters of Hé Jín called on him to avenge the partisan proscriptions and destroy the eunuch faction, but his sister the Dowager-Empress opposed the proposal. At the urging of Yuán Shào, Hé Jín summoned armies from the provinces in a show of force to put pressure on his sister and the eunuchs. On September 22\(^{nd}\) 189, the terrified eunuchs lured Hé Jín into the Palace and assassinated him. Hé Jín’s supporters attacked the Palace in revenge, and as the leading eunuch officials took the Emperor and his younger brother and fled the Palace and the capital, Yuán Shào led his troops to slaughter all the eunuchs that remained.\(^{30}\) The eunuchs and the two Imperial children were pursued to the Yellow River, where in despair the eunuchs drowned themselves. On the morning of September 25\(^{th}\), as the children returned to the capital, they were greeted by the General Dǒng Zhuó.\(^{31}\)

A long serving military commander on the frontier, Dǒng Zhuó had participated in campaigns against both the Yellow Headscarves and the Liáng Province mutiny, and was one of the Generals summoned to the capital by Hé Jín. In the chaos of the evening of September 22\(^{nd}\), Dǒng Zhuó saw fires rise in the capital, and without legal authority or command, he led his troops into the city.

The assassination of Hé Jín and the slaughter of the eunuchs had left a power vacuum which Dǒng Zhuó soon filled. Hé Jín’s former troops joined him, and though Hé Jín’s officer Dīng Yuán might have been an alternative rallying point, Dǒng Zhuó persuaded Dīng Yuán’s officer Lǚ Bù\(^{32}\) to defect and assassinate him. On September 28\(^{th}\), probably to justify his regency, Dǒng Zhuó deposed the already teenage Liú Biàn in favor of the younger Liú Xiè, the future Emperor Xiàn.\(^{33}\) Two days later, Dǒng Zhuó removed a potential threat by having the Dowager-Empress Hé poisoned. On March 26\(^{th}\) of the next year, Dǒng Zhuó had Liú Biàn poisoned as well.

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\(^{25}\) The Hán ji of Zhāng Fán has fourteen, but this seems less likely. See de Crespigny, Fire Over Luoyang, 458.

\(^{26}\) General-in-Chief (dà jiāngjūn) was originally the highest ranking General, but by this time had commonly been given to senior male relatives of the Empress and become associated with regency; see de Crespigny, Fire Over Luoyang, 125 and Bielestein, Bureaucracy, 124. Hé Jín (d. 189) has biography in HHS 69.

\(^{27}\) See de Crespigny “Imperial Succession,” Fire Over Luoyang, 436-442.

\(^{28}\) See the biographies of Yuán Ān and his descendants in HHS 45.

\(^{29}\) Yuán Shào (d. 202) has biographies in HHS 74 and SGZ 6. Yuán Shù (d. 199) has biographies in HHS 75 and SGZ 6.

\(^{30}\) The slaughter was done without regard to age or innocence, so that some beardless full men were killed by mistake. For more detail see de Crespigny, “Slaughter in the Palace,” Fire Over Luoyang, 442-448.

\(^{31}\) Dǒng Zhuó (d. 192) has biographies in HHS 72 and SGZ 6. See also de Crespigny, “Dong Zhuo” and “Ruin of a Capital,” Fire Over Luoyang, 449-465.

\(^{32}\) Lǚ Bù (d. 199) has biographies in HHS 75 and SGZ 7.

\(^{33}\) Liú Xiè (181 – 234), posthumously Emperor Xiàn, has annals in HHS 9.
Though Dōng Zhuó formalized his position within the Imperial government by taking title as Chancellor of State,\textsuperscript{34} he had gained and enforced his authority through military power. Only rival military power could remove him. Yuán Shào, Yuán Shù, and other major figures of the capital who rejected Dōng Zhuó’s regime fled Luòyáng to join with powerful provincial figures in raising their own armies against him.

By the beginning of 190, the entire east of the Empire was cut off from the capital as these regional powers led their newly raised armies to blockade the eastern approaches to the capital region of Luòyáng. Yuán Shào was elected leader of this alliance and occupied a northern camp in Hénèi. A group of lesser figures formed an eastern camp in Chénliú. Yuán Shù formed a southern camp in Nányáng.\textsuperscript{35}

Concerned about the relatively exposed position of Luòyáng, Dōng Zhuó ordered the capital evacuated west to Cháng’án, while he and his army remained at Luòyáng, which they proceeded to loot and destroy. Wealthy households were killed, their property confiscated, the Imperial Palaces and Temples were burned, and the Imperial Tombs were broken open to seize the treasures buried within.

One of the leaders in the eastern camp in Chénliú, Cáo Cāo,\textsuperscript{36} urged his colleagues to take the offensive, claiming Dōng Zhuó’s evacuation of Luòyáng was a sign of weakness. Cáo Cāo had military experience from fighting Yellow Headscarves, but he received little support from his allies in his proposal, and when he sought to advance with what he had, he was defeated by Dōng Zhuó’s officer Xǔ Róng. Cáo Cāo left to recruit more troops while the eastern camp at Chénliú ran out of supplies and broke apart into infighting.

In the southern camp, Yuán Shù’s power was greatly expanded by the arrival of Sūn Jiān.\textsuperscript{37} Born into a humble family from the southeast,\textsuperscript{38} Sūn Jiān rose to prominence through military service against local bandits, the Yellow Headscarves, and the Liáng Province mutiny. He had been appointed to Chángshā in southern Jīng Province, but at the uprising against Dōng Zhuó left that post to march north to join Yuán Shù, and along the way he killed Wáng Ruì the Inspector of Jīng Province and Zhāng Zī the Administrator of Nányáng, taking over their troops. Yuán Shù filled the vacancy in Nányáng himself, but the vacancy in Jīng Province was filled by a new appointee sent by the Imperial Court, Liú Biāo.\textsuperscript{39} Though Liú Biāo had been appointed by Dōng Zhuó’s regime, he maintained an uneasy neutrality with Yuán Shù.

Sūn Jiān’s initial attack was defeated by Dōng Zhuó’s officer Xǔ Róng, but by 191 Sūn Jiān had rallied his troops to advance again, defeating Dōng Zhuó’s officers Hú Zhēn and Lǚ Bù.\textsuperscript{40} Sūn Jiān advanced to

\textsuperscript{34} Chancellor of State (xiàngguó) had been the highest level of the bureaucracy at the beginning of Hán. See HS 19 and Bielenstein, Bureaucracy, 7 and 11-12.
\textsuperscript{35} A full list of the participating warlords and their deployments is given in SGZ 1.
\textsuperscript{36} Cáo Cāo (155 – 220), posthumously Wěi Emperor Wū, has annals in SGZ 1.
\textsuperscript{37} Sūn Jiān (155 – 191), posthumously Wú Emperor Wǔ-Lìè has biography in SGZ 46. See also de Crespigny, “Founder of the Family: Sun Jian,” Generals of the South, 70-145.
\textsuperscript{38} Various unreliable folktales and traditions claim that Sūn Jiān’s father had been a merchant or melon seller; the lack of firm information is itself telling on the family’s lack of status in those generations.
\textsuperscript{39} Liú Biāo (d. 208) has biographies in HHS 74 and SGZ 6.
\textsuperscript{40} The case of Hú Zhēn’s subordinate Hùà Xióng is a good example of how much the mythology can deviate from the history due to the vagaries of storytelling. Though Hùà Xióng is known to history only from a single reference of being among those killed in this battle, he is a popular character in the Romance given many fictional feats, killed in a duel with the celebrated Guǎn Yǔ instead of in battle against Sūn Jiān.
Luoyang, defeated Dong Zhuo, and retook the ruins of the capital in the spring of 191 while Dong Zhuo retreated west to Chang’an.41

Despite his great achievements, Sun Jian’s position in Luoyang was untenable, and after cleaning and sacrificing at the Imperial Temples, he led his army back east. Before they left, they found the Imperial Seal, the primary insignia of the Emperors of Han, which was given over to Yuan Shu.42

2.3 The Division of the Empire

Even before Sun Jian returned from the ruins of Luoyang, the warlords were already turning against one another. The eastern camp had already broken apart from lack of supplies and infighting, while in the northern camp Yuan Shao with the Governor of Ji Province, Han Fu, proposed enthroning the Governor of You Province, Liu Yu,43 a cadet of the Imperial family, as an alternative Emperor to give legitimacy to their uprising against Dong Zhuo. The proposal was opposed by Cao Cao, Yuan Shu, and others, including Liu Yu himself, and though it was abandoned it led to growing tensions.

Yuan Shao also was concerned about his lack of a secure base. Though he had been elected leader of the alliance, that very alliance was breaking apart, and he depended on Han Fu for supplies. Using a plan drawn up with his advisors, Yuan Shao wrote a letter encouraging Gongsun Zan,44 a general on the northern frontier in You Province, to strike south to seize control of Ji Province from Han Fu, and as Han Fu was terrified by this new threat, Yuan Shao sent emissaries who convinced Han Fu to yield his position. By the summer of 191, Yuan Shao as the new Governor of Ji Province had established himself north of the Yellow River, with control over one of the most prosperous territories in the Empire.45

Yuan Shu and Yuan Shao had long been rivals for seniority within the family,46 and with the campaign against Dong Zhuo going nowhere, the rivalry broke into open hostilities. While Yuan Shu’s officer Sun Jian was still away attacking Dong Zhuo, Yuan Shao sent a force to attack his base camp. Sun Jian returned and defeated this attack, with the assistance of cavalry sent by Gongsun Zan, but Gongsun Zan’s younger cousin was killed in battle. Gongsun Zan, probably already upset over the previous trickery in Ji Province, used this as justification to attack Yuan Shao. Yuan Shu and Gongsun Zan became allies against Yuan Shao, and Yuan Shao in turn allied with Liu Bi to create a threat to Yuan Shu’s rear. Yuan Shu sent Sun Jian to attack Liu Bi, but Sun Jian was killed in a skirmish, and the campaign fell apart with his death. In the north, Yuan Shao’s forces decisively defeated Gongsun Zan’s invasion at Jie Bridge early in 192, and thereafter Gongsun Zan gradually lost momentum and was forced onto the defensive.

Aside from these actions of the major warlords, there were many smaller groups at work. Bandit and rebel groups continued to ravage the east of the Empire, and as a group called the Black Mountain bandits plundered the southern regions of Yuan Shao’s territory, Yuan Shao sent Cao Cao to deal with them.

41 For more on Sun Jian’s campaign, see his biography in SGZ 46, and de Crespigny, Generals of the South, 120-129.
42 For a history of the Imperial “Inheriting State Seal” (chuanguguoxi) see de Crespigny, Generals of the South, 138-145.
43 Liu Yu (d. 193) has biography in HHS 73.
44 Gongsun Zan has biographies in HHS 73 and SGZ 8.
45 An account of Yuan Shao’s successful coup against Han Fu is given in his biographies in HHS 74 and SGZ 6.
46 According to their biographies in HHS and SGZ, they were originally half-brothers, with Yuan Shao the elder born of a concubine and Yuan Shu the younger born of a principal wife. Yuan Shao however was later adopted over to continue the line of his father’s elder brother, placing him in a senior position to Yuan Shu, to the latter’s dismay.
Cáo Cāo came from a family relatively new to prominence. His great-grandfather had evidently been a farmer, whose youngest son Cáo Téng become a eunuch in service of the Palace. In this position, Cáo Téng gained influence for himself and his extended family, and his adopted son Cáo Sōng was able to amass a great deal of wealth and reach the highest levels of government. Cáo Cāo himself had held various middle level positions in the government, and at the uprising against Dòng Zhuó he used the family’s private funds to raise his army, gaining about five thousand men, though this was still quite small compared to the tens of thousands led by the greater warlords of the alliance.

Through most of 191, Cáo Cāo cleared out bandit groups and participated in Yuán Shào’s battles against Yuán Shū, being appointed Administrator of Dōng prefecture to secure Yuán Shào’s southern flank. When Yuán Shào’s ally the Inspector of Yán Province, Liú Dài, was killed in battle against Yellow Headscarves bandits, the local provincial officials rallied around Cáo Cāo, who claimed office as Governor of Yán Province. By 192 he had defeated and accepted the surrender of most of the Yellow Headscarves.

Back in the west, Dòng Zhuó maintained his hold over the hostage Imperial Court with ever greater displays of brutality, and bestowed higher titles and rewards upon himself and his clan. Aware of the resentment he was attracting, Dòng Zhuó had Lǚ Bù serve as his bodyguard, and the two even swore oath to act as father and son, but Dòng Zhuó’s temper and violence was such that Lǚ Bù feared for his own life. Lǚ Bù joined a plot led by the senior minister Wáng Yūn, and on May 22nd 192, Lǚ Bù personally assassinated Dòng Zhuó. Wáng Yūn and Lǚ Bù attempted to establish a new regime, but Dòng Zhuó’s former subordinates Lǐ Jué, Guō Sì, and others led their troops to take revenge. Wáng Yūn was killed, Lǚ Bù was forced to flee east, and the Emperor Xiàn fell under the control of Lǐ Jué and the rest.

### 2.4 Custody of the Emperor

Early in 193, Liú Biǎo cut off Yuán Shū’s supply lines, leading Yuán Shū to abandon Nányáng and attempt to move north, but Cáo Cāo with help from Yuán Shào defeated and drove him away, so that Yuán Shū was forced southeast. Yuán Shū took refuge in the Huái river valley, making claims over Xǔ and Yáng Provinces, to the anxiety of his nominal ally Tào Qiān, Governor of Xǔ Province.

In 193 and 194, Cáo Cāo launched two major campaigns into Xǔ Province against Tào Qiān, in part because Cáo Cāo’s father Cáo Sōng was killed by Tào Qiān’s subordinates. However, while he was away on the

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47 Adoption was typically done within the clan, but annotations to SGZ 1 include the claim that Cáo Sōng had been adopted from the Xiǎhóu, an allied family which regularly intermarried with the Cáo family: Chén Shòu groups biographies of various Cáo and Xiǎhóu together in SGZ 9.

48 Cáo Téng is included in the biographies of eunuchs in HHS 78, with his adopted son Cáo Sōng attached, wherein it is told that Cáo Sōng paid incredible amounts of money for his positions due to Emperor Ling’s policy of selling government offices at the time. Further information on Cáo Cāo’s lineage is also given in SGZ 1.

49 For a more detailed account see SGZ 1 and de Crespigny, “To Govern Yan Province,” Imperial Warlord, 52-68.

50 Wáng Yūn (137 – 192) has biography in HHS 66.

51 The biographies of Dòng Zhuó in HHS 72 and SGZ 6 continue after his death to relate the stories of Lǐ Jué, Guō Sì, and the rest.

52 Tào Qiān (132 – 194) has biography in HHS 73 and SGZ 8. Prior to Yuán Shū’s arrival, he had been an ally of Yuán Shū and Gōngsūn Zàn against Yuán Shào and Liú Biǎo.

53 Though it is often believed that Cáo Cāo took his father’s murder as an excuse to attack, the biography of Ying Shào in HHS 48 dates Cáo Sōng’s death to 194, between Cáo Cāo’s first and second campaign. The two sides were also already at war due to their opposing alliances with Yuán Shào and Yuán Shū, and SGZ 1 claims that the first invasion was in response to Tào Qiān’s own invasion of Yán Province. An account in Wū shū appended to SGZ 8
second campaign, a group of his closest allies and subordinates led by Zhāng Miǎo and Chén Gōng rebelled against him, inviting Lǚ Bù to take control over Yān Province.

Since being driven out of the west, Lǚ Bù had taken refuge with Yuán Shù and then Yuán Shào, distinguishing himself in helping them put down bandits, but in both cases he eventually angered his host and was forced to move on. It was during these travels that he met and befriended Zhāng Miǎo, and at Chén Gōng’s advice, Zhāng Miǎo invited Lǚ Bù into Yān Province. Cáo Cāo returned to contest control over the Province, and by late 195 he had successfully driven Lǚ Bù away. Zhāng Miǎo was killed by his own troops, while Lǚ Bù fled east into Xú Province, now under the control of Táo Qiān’s successor Liú Bèi.

Meanwhile in the west, the military regime of Lǐ Jué and Guō Sì and the rest broke apart into violent infighting. In 195 the Emperor was able to bluff his way out of Cháng’ān, and though Lǐ Jué and Guō Sì pursued, the Emperor successfully escaped back east, reaching the ruins of Luòyáng early in 196. In Yuán Shào’s court, it was suggested that he take custody of the Emperor, but Yuán Shào decided to instead focus on the more practical questions of consolidating his actual power and destroying Gōngsūn Zàn, his last major rival in the north. In contrast Cáo Cāo actively sought custody of the Imperial Court to give legitimacy to his own power, personally leading his army to the ruins of Luòyáng to relocate the Court to his own headquarters at Xū city. Thereafter, though the Emperor continued to serve as nominal ruler and perform ceremonial Imperial duties, real control of the Imperial government was largely held by Cáo Cāo through his advisor Xún Yù.

Though he had gained custody of the Emperor, Cáo Cāo was still only one of many warlords, and these other warlords could reject his claims to legitimacy just as they had rejected Dōng Zhuó. Therefore, though he gained a useful diplomatic and propaganda tool, he also needed actual power to support his claims, and pursued an active program of development of his territory through the implementation of tún tián “Garrison-Farms,” agricultural colonies of refugees settled as soldier-farmers on vacant land. The devastation of the civil war had left both large amounts of abandoned land and large numbers of refugees, and the Garrison-Farm system provided a solution to both these problems, bolstering the strength of Cáo Cāo’s government and armies with both food and manpower.

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54 Information on Zhāng Miǎo (d. 195) and Chén Gōng (d. 199) is attached to the biography of Lǚ Bù in SGZ 7.

55 Accounts of the debate surrounding the decision are in Yuán Shào’s biographies in HHS 74 and SGZ 6.

56 Xún Yù (163 – 212) has biographies in HHS 70 and SGZ 10.

57 Yuán Shào in fact was able to firmly reject and humble Cáo Cāo’s earliest attempts to use the Emperor to assert authority over him; see de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord 88-89.

58 SGZ 1 and its Wèi shū annotations emphasize the success of the Garrison-Farm program in laying the foundations for Cáo Cāo’s later political and military successes, contrasting it to reports of Yuán Shào’s troops resorting to scavenging for mulberries and Yuán Shù’s troops to scavenging for shellfish.
2.5 THE SETTLEMENT OF THE EAST

In 194, while Cáo Cāo was still battling Lǚ Bù for control of Yǎn Province, Táo Qiān died, and his subordinates offered command of Xú Province to Líu Bèi, a fighting man from the northern frontier. Líu Bèi claimed descent from the Emperor Jǐng of Hàn of some three hundred years ago, but the connection was distant and not exclusive, and his grandfather and father had only held local government positions. He gained military experience against the Yellow Headscarves and on the frontiers, and in 190, at the outbreak of the civil war, Líu Bèi initially served Gōngsūn Zàn, but in 193 as Gōngsūn Zàn sent him to help Táo Qiān in resisting Cáo Cāo’s invasions, he transferred his allegiance to Táo Qiān. In 195, as Lǚ Bù was defeated by Cáo Cāo and fled east, he took refuge with Líu Bèi.

Líu Bèi’s first major threat came from the south, where Yuán Shù was making his own claims to Xú Province. In 196, Yuán Shù attacked, and as Líu Bèi personally went south to command the defense, Yuán Shù urged Lǚ Bù to betray his host and seize control of Xú Province for himself. Trapped between Yuán Shù and Lǚ Bù, Líu Bèi surrendered to Lǚ Bù, and Lǚ Bù accepted Líu Bèi as an ally in order to turn against Yuán Shù and drive him back. Yuán Shù sought to restore alliance with Lǚ Bù, and when Lǚ Bù agreed, Yuán Shù again sent an army to attack Líu Bèi. However, concerned that the destruction of Líu Bèi would leave himself vulnerable, Lǚ Bù once again intervened, convincing Yuán Shù’s army to withdraw. After this Líu

59 Líu Bèi (161 – 223) has biography in SGZ 32.
60 Líu Bèi claimed descent from Emperor Jǐng through his son Liú Shèng, who according to HS 55 fathered 120 sons and daughters.
61 According to the account in Lǚ Bù’s biography in HHS 75 and SGZ 7, Lǚ Bù called a meeting with Líu Bèi and Yuán Shù’s officers. There he set up a halberd at the gate of his camp, stating that he would shoot it with his bow: if he
Bèi sought to rebuild his strength by recruiting more troops, so Lǚ Bù became afraid and attacked him. Liú Bèi was defeated and fled to take refuge with Cáo Cāo near the end of 196.

Some of Cáo Cāo’s advisors urged him to kill Liú Bèi, but Cáo Cāo observed that killing a popular hero like Liú Bèi would damage his reputation, and instead accepted Liú Bèi, giving him supplies and troops to return east against Lǚ Bù. Cáo Cāo’s own attention was to the south, to the new threat of Zhāng Xiū. Zhāng Jiù had been a subordinate of Dōng Zhuó, and with Lǐ Jué and Guō Sì had taken part in the military regime in the west after Dōng Zhuó’s death. After the Emperor’s escape and breakdown of the military regime, Zhāng Ji went east and invaded Nányáng, but was killed in battle, and command passed to his cousin’s son Zhāng Xiù. The Governor of Jing Province, Liú Biǎo, sought reconciliation, and Zhāng Xiū became his junior ally, stationed in Nányáng as a threat to Cáo Cāo’s positions in Yú Province. In early 197, Cáo Cāo led his army against Nányáng, whereupon Zhāng Xiū surrendered, but soon after he rebelled and attacked Cáo Cāo by surprise. Cáo Cāo’s army was defeated, and Zhāng Xiū returned to Liú Biǎo.

Cáo Cāo rebuilt his strength, confirming his hold on southern Yú Province by driving away Yuán Shū’s probes into the region, and in late 197 and early 198 he returned to attack Zhāng Xiū in two more campaigns. Though unable to conquer Zhāng Xiū, Cáo Cāo forced Zhāng Xiū on the defensive, freeing himself to turn his attention back east to the ongoing struggle between Yuán Shù, Lǚ Bù, and Liú Bèi.

Early in 197, Yuán Shū declared himself Emperor. From his perspective, he controlled the greater part of Yáng Province through the energetic campaigns of his officer Sūn Cē, son of the late Sūn Jiān, as well as parts of Xū Province, where he had recently defeated Liú Bèi and restored alliance with Lǚ Bù, and Yú Province, where Cáo Cāo had recently been defeated by Zhāng Xiū. He also cited his possession of the Imperial Seal, and various prophecies concerning the end of Hán that he interpreted to refer to himself. The decision, however, proved to be a disaster: Sūn Cē renounced his allegiance and broke off on his own, Lǚ Bù broke off the alliance and decisively defeated Yuán Shū’s attempted counter-attack, and Cáo Cāo crushed Yuán Shū’s attempt to expand northwest into southern Yú Province.

In 198, Lǚ Bù changed sides yet again, reviving the alliance with Yuán Shù and attacking Liú Bèi. Cáo Cāo personally campaigned east. By the beginning of 199, Lǚ Bù was defeated and captured. He offered to surrender to Cáo Cāo, but Liú Bèi made comment on how treacherous Lǚ Bù had proven, and Lǚ Bù was executed.

With the destruction of Lǚ Bù, Cáo Cāo held firm control over all the territory between the Yellow and Huái rivers. South of the Huái, Yuán Shù still remained, but his territory was reduced to the area between

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62 Anecdotes surrounding the debate appear in SGZ 1 and the biographies of Chéng Yù and Guó Jiā in SGZ 14.
63 Zhāng Xiū (d. 207) has biography in SGZ 8.
64 According to SGZ 8, this was motivated in part by Cáo Cāo taking a widow of Zhāng Ji as a concubine and giving gold to Zhāng Xiū’s officer Hú Ché’ér, in what was probably an attempt to suborn his loyalty.
65 Cáo Cāo’s bodyguard Diān Wēi was killed in a desperate last stand to buy Cáo Cāo time to escape, and Cáo Cāo’s eldest son Áng and nephew Ánmín were killed in battle. Diān Wēi has biography in SGZ 18.
66 Sūn Cē (175 – 200) has biography in SGZ 46.
67 Exact details on the meeting vary in the accounts given in HHS 75 and SGZ 7, but most versions include Liú Bèi mentioning Dīng Yuán and Dōng Zhuó; both were former patrons of Lǚ Bù that he had assassinated. However, his constant changing of sides between Yuán Shù and Liú Bèi would probably have been a more relevant example.
the Huái and Yángzǐ rivers and suffering from famine and his own mismanagement, so he was no longer a serious threat. Cáo Cāo’s attention was now on the north, against Yuán Shào.

2.6 The Settlement of the North

In 198, Yuán Shào finally destroyed Gōngsūn Zàn, leaving him the greatest power north of the Yellow River, with claim to authority over the four northern provinces of Jī, Bing, Qīng and Yōu. Yuán Shào personally claimed office as Governor of Jī Province, and he entrusted command of Qīng to his eldest son Yuán Tán, Yōu to his next son Yuán Xī, and Bing to his sister’s son Gāo Gān. His hold over these territories was incomplete however, and to the south Cáo Cāo was clearly a rising star, now with control over the greater parts of Yán, Yù, and Xú Provinces, growing influence in Sīlǐ, and claim to legitimacy through his control of the Hán Emperor. In 199, Yuán Shào began preparations for an attack southward against Cáo Cāo, which was announced and begun in early 200. He issued a call to arms that accused Cáo Cāo of usurping control of the Imperial Court and numerous other crimes, and which boasted of the mobilization of 100,000 infantry and 10,000 cavalry for a southern campaign to crush him.

On the other side, Cáo Cāo focused on preparing his defenses, securing his rear and flanks, and sending raids to disrupt Yuán Shào’s own preparations. To the south, Zhāng Xiū surrendered, this time genuinely, helping secure the rear. To the west, Cáo Cāo’s officer Zhōng Yāo used diplomacy to ensure the neutrality of the numerous warlords in the Wēi river valley in Sīlǐ, securing that flank. In the east, however, a potential threat appeared as Yuán Shù, his failed regime utterly collapsing, attempted to take the last of his forces to flee north to surrender to Yuán Shào. Cáo Cāo sent Liú Bèi to intercept Yuán Shù as he attempted to travel through Xú Province. Yuán Shù was forced to turn back, died of illness, and the remnants of his followers were eventually captured and absorbed by Sūn Cē.

Liú Bèi, however, had become involved in a conspiracy against Cáo Cāo. Sometime in 199, Dōng Chéng, a father of an Imperial consort, claimed to have received a secret edict from the Emperor to kill Cáo Cāo, and Liú Bèi had joined the plot while in the capital. After arriving in Xú Province and blocking Yuán Shù, Liú Bèi seized control of the Province and rebelled. Back in the capital, Dōng Chéng’s plot was discovered in the beginning of 200, and all involved were executed along with their clans. With that settled, Cáo Cāo personally campaigned against Liú Bèi, crushing the rebellion. A defeated Liú Bèi fled north to join Yuán Shào, who began his invasion.

As Yuán Shào’s army crossed the Yellow River, Cáo Cāo led a fighting retreat, drawing Yuán Shào’s forces toward Guándū, where Cáo Cāo had concentrated his preparations. There Yuán Shào’s advance ground to a halt, and the campaign became a protracted deadlock for several months.

As the resources of both sides were stretched to their limits, Cáo Cāo made raids on Yuán Shào’s extended supply lines. In the beginning of winter, one of Yuán Shào’s advisors Xū Yōu defected and revealed that

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68 The bandit warlord Zhāng Yān in Bing Province had been defeated but not fully destroyed, while a group of local officials in Yǒu Province led by Xiānyú Fū supported Cáo Cāo rather than Yuán Shào. See SGZ 8.
69 The text of the proclamation is appended to SGZ 6 and given in HHS 74.
70 Zhōng Yāo (151 – 230) has biography in SGZ 13.
71 Included was Dōng Chéng’s daughter, a consort of the Emperor, who was pregnant at the time; the story is given in HHS 10.
72 The accounts in Yuán Shào’s biography in SGZ 6 and HHS 74 tell of a long struggle with extensive fortifications, siege engines, and tunneling.
Yuán Shào had received a large shipment of supplies at Wūcháo. Leaving his officers Cáo Hóng and Xún Yōu73 in command of the defense at his main camp, Cáo Cāo personally led the raid on Wūcháo. As news of the raid arrived, Yuán Shào decided to concentrate his efforts on attacking Cáo Cāo’s main camp while he was away. He sent Zhāng Hé74 and Gāo Lǎn to lead an attack on Guāndū, and only a lesser force of cavalry to relieve Wūcháo. With the relief force approaching, Cáo Cāo used the desperate situation to inspire the troops to break through and capture Wūcháo, destroying all the supplies. Meanwhile, the attack on Cáo Cāo’s main camp failed, and as news of the destruction of Wūcháo spread, Zhāng Hé and Gāo Lǎn destroyed their siege engines and surrendered to Cáo Hóng and Xún Yōu. With their supplies destroyed and their chief officers defected, Yuán Shào’s army collapsed. Yuán Shào abandoned his camp and baggage and fled north across the Yellow River, but a great part of his army was captured and killed.75

The Guāndū campaign had exhausted both sides, and so most of 201 was spent on recovering from losses and consolidating gains. Cáo Cāo captured Yuán Shào’s last remaining outposts south of the Yellow River, while Yuán Shào put down local rebellions north of the Yellow River that had broken out after his defeat at Guāndū. However, in the summer of 202, Yuán Shào died at his headquarters at Yè.

Yuán Shào had three sons, Yuán Tán, Yuán Xī, and Yuán Shàng. Though Yuán Tán was the eldest, Yuán Shào had favored the youngest, Yuán Shàng, and Yuán Shào’s staff and advisors split into factions around these two potential candidates. At Yuán Shào’s death, Yuán Shàng’s supporters pushed through his succession before Yuán Tán could arrive at Yè, and a resentful Yuán Tán moved south to camp at Líyáng on the north bank of the Yellow River.

At the end of the autumn of 202, Cáo Cāo began his offensive, attacking Yuán Tán at Líyáng, who asked for help from Yuán Shàng. The two brothers therefore joined together and put up a tough resistance for several months, but by the beginning of 203 they were forced to abandon Líyáng and retreated to Yè. Cáo Cāo pursued them, but he had evidently overextended himself and was defeated outside Yè.76 Adjusting strategy, he returned south, giving the Yuán brothers room for the succession dispute to break out again.

The expected rift appeared almost immediately after Cáo Cāo had withdrawn. As Cáo Cāo was crossing the Yellow River, Yuán Tán asked for more troops to pursue and attack Cáo Cāo, but Yuán Shàng refused, and the brothers attacked one another outside Yè. Yuán Tán was defeated and fled south, pursued by Yuán Shàng, and in desperation Yuán Tán sent envoys to Cáo Cāo. In the winter of 203, Cáo Cāo returned north to Líyáng and arranged an alliance with Yuán Tán, while Yuán Shàng returned to Yè.

In the spring of 204, however, just as Cáo Cāo was preparing to attack Yè, Yuán Shàng returned to attacking his brother.77 By the summer, Cáo Cāo had besieged Yè, and by autumn the city was starving. Yuán Shàng at last returned to rescue his headquarters, but Cáo Cāo attacked and defeated him, and Yuán Shàng fled

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73 Cáo Hóng (d. 232) has biography in SGZ 9. Xún Yōu (157 – 214) has biography in SGZ 10.
74 Zhāng Hé (d. 231) has biography in SGZ 17.
75 Accounts in SGZ 1 boast of killing 70,000 to 80,000 of Yuán Shào’s army, but this is certainly exaggeration.
76 The account in SGZ 1 does not state this explicitly but implies it by quotation of announced order; HHS 74 mentions the defeat explicitly.
77 As de Crespigny remarks in Imperial Warlord 216: “It seems like a death-wish: the combined forces of the family might have been able to match Cao Cao on their home ground north of the Yellow River, but Yuan Shang maintained the war against Yuan Tan even as their mutual enemy was at the gates of his major stronghold.”
north to his brother Yuán Xī in Yōu Province. Yè was taken soon afterward, and Yuán Shàng’s cousin Gāo Gàn in Bīng Province surrendered.

During these campaigns, Yuán Tán had focused on making his own marginal gains while Cāo Cāo had been engaged with attacking Yè, and in the beginning of 205 Cāo Cāo used this to claim that Yuán Tán had broken their alliance and moved to attack him. Yuán Tán was destroyed, and Qīng Province was settled. Meanwhile local officials in Yōu Province rebelled against Yuán Xī and Yuán Shàng in support of Cāo Cāo, forcing them to flee north to the Wūhuán.79 Near the end of 205, Gāo Gàn again rebelled, perhaps in hopes of receiving support from his Yuán cousins and the Wūhuán, but in 206 he was defeated and killed, and Bīng Province was settled.

Cāo Cāo now prepared to finish off the Yuán for good, as well as destroy the growing power of the Wūhuán. In 207 he led a daring march through the wilderness to catch the Wūhuán by surprise. The leading Wūhuán chieftains were killed or surrendered, forcing Yuán Xī and Yuán Shàng to flee to the Liáodōng peninsula, but the local warlord Gōngsūn Kāng79 killed them and sent their heads to Cāo Cāo.

By 208, Cāo Cāo was now undisputed master of the north, with control over the greater parts of former Jī, Bīng, Qīng, Yōu, Yān, Yú, Xú provinces, and parts of eastern Sū. For the first half of the year he largely focused on government matters, enacting reforms and new systems, and he finally formalized his control over the Hàn Imperial Court by taking office as Chancellor. Then he turned his attention south.

2.7 The Settlement of the South

Sūn Cè, eldest son of Sūn Jiān, was only about fifteen at the death of his father in 191.80 While his father had gone on campaign against Dōng Zhuó, he with his mother and brothers had gone to the southeast, in the region about the Huái and lower Yángzǐ rivers. In 193, Yuán Shū was defeated by Cāo Cāo and fled to that region as well, and Sūn Cè went to Yuán Shū’s headquarters at Shōuchūn to seek opportunities from his father’s former patron. Possibly due to his youth, Sūn Cè received only minor positions under Yuán Shū, but his presence served as a rallying point for his father’s former subordinates.

In 194, the Imperial Court under the control of Lī Jué and the other former subordinates of Dōng Zhuó appointed Liú Yáo81 to Yáng Province. Avoiding direct conflict with Yuán Shū, Liú Yáo first crossed the Yángzǐ river and built support there, and once sufficiently strong he asserted his claims to the Province, holding the line at the Yángzǐ, so that Yuán Shū effectively lost control of everything south of the river. The Sūn family’s ancestral home was in Wú, the southeastern part of Yáng province about the lower Yángzǐ, and in 195 Sūn Cè proposed leveraging his local connections to conquer the territory from Liú Yáo. Yuán Shū gave him leave, and Sūn Cè took command of operations against Liú Yáo. By 196 he had driven Liú Yáo west up the Yángzǐ and conquered most of southeastern Yáng Province. In 197, as Yuán Shū claimed Imperial Title, Sūn Cè broke with him, establishing an independent position in his conquered territory.

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79 The Wūhuán were a nomadic people on the northeastern frontier, with biographies in SGZ 30.
79 Gōngsūn Dū (d. 204), his son Gōngsūn Kāng, and grandson Gōngsūn Yuán (d. 238) maintained a warlord regime in the Liáodōng peninsula in the northeast; their biographies are in SGZ 8.
80 A more complete account on Sūn Cè’s life and career is given in his biography in SGZ 46 and in de Crespigny, “The Young Gentleman: Sun Ce,” Generals of the South, 146-212.
81 Liú Yáo (157 – 198) has biography in SGZ 49.
For the next few years Sūn Cè continued expanding his territory, focusing his campaigns westward up the Yángzǐ against western Jīng province, under the command of Líu Biǎo’s officer Huáng Zū. When Yuán Shǔ died in 199, Sūn Cè captured and took over many of Yuán Shū’s former followers. By 200, Sūn Cè was the major power in the southeast, controlling the greater part of Yáng Province and threatening to expand west into Jīng Province and north into Xú Province, but as he prepared for another campaign, possibly northward against Cáo Cāo, he was assassinated by remnant retainers of a local clan he had crushed during his conquests. He was only twenty-five.

Sūn Quán, second son of Sūn Jiān, was about eighteen when he succeeded his brother’s command in 200. He was greatly aided by Sūn Cè’s advisor Zhāng Zhāo, who functioned almost as a regent at this difficult time, as well as Sūn Cè’s close friend Zhōu Yú, who functioned as a chief of staff for military administration. For the next few years, the war against Líu Biǎo and Huáng Zū continued, until a final offensive in the spring of 208 destroyed and killed Huáng Zū.

Líu Biǎo, Governor of Jīng Province, was not an aggressive leader. Previously in 200, Yuán Shào had called on him to be a threat to Cáo Cāo’s rear during the Guāndū campaign, but from Guāndū and afterward even to Cáo Cāo’s conquest of the north, Líu Biǎo had failed to take decisive action. In 208, Jīng Province was faced with two very dangerous threats, Cáo Cāo to the north and Sūn Quán to the east, and that autumn Líu Biǎo died, leaving two sons, Líu Qí and Líu Cóng. Líu Qí was the elder son, but Líu Biǎo had favored Líu Cóng, and at his death, Líu Biǎo’s court established Líu Cóng as successor, leading Líu Qí to contest the succession.

There was, however, a third party to complicate matters further: Líu Bèi. Previously, during the Guāndū campaign in 200, Yuán Shào had sent Líu Bèi to raid and plunder in Yú Province to disrupt Cáo Cāo’s rear, but as Yuán Shào was defeated Cáo Cāo turned south to put an end to this, and Líu Bèi fled to take refuge with Líu Biǎo. For the next few years he had served as a commander in Líu Biǎo’s northern defenses, but Líu Biǎo was hesitant to entrust him with too much authority.

In the autumn of 208, Cáo Cāo led his army south into Jīng Province, and Líu Cóng surrendered to him. Líu Bèi meanwhile served as a rallying point for those opposed to surrender, but as he sought to evacuate south, he was attacked and defeated by Cáo Cāo. Líu Bèi fled east and joined with Líu Qí, where they were trapped between the advancing forces of Cáo Cāo and Sūn Quán.

When news of Líu Biǎo’s death had arrived in the east, Sūn Quán sent his officer Lù Sū to observe the situation. Meeting up with Liú Bèi’s retreating forces, Lù Sū encouraged Liú Bèi to join with Sūn Quán in opposing Cáo Cāo. As Lù Sū returned east with Liú Bèi’s representative Zhūgě Liàng, Cáo Cāo also sent calls on Sūn Quán to surrender, a policy that Zhāng Zhāo and other advisors of Sūn Quán supported. However, encouraged by Lù Sū and Zhōu Yú, Sūn Quán decided on alliance with Liú Bèi in opposition to Cáo Cāo, sending an army under Zhōu Yú, who took command of the allied forces.

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82 Sūn Quán (182 – 252), posthumously Wú Emperor Dà, has biography in SGZ 47. For an account of his early career, see de Crespiigny, “To the Red Cliffs: Sun Quan 200-208,” Generals of the South 213-286.
83 Zhāng Zhāo (156 – 236) has biography in SGZ 52.
84 Zhōu Yú (175 – 210) has biography in SGZ 54.
85 Lù Sū (172 – 217) has biography in SGZ 54.
86 Zhūgě Liàng (181 – 234) has biography in SGZ 35.
Cao Cao led his forces to Wulin on the northern bank of the Yangzi, while Zhou Yu commanded the allied forces on the southern bank at Chibi, the “Red Cliffs.” Taking advantage of favorable winds, Zhou Yu sent an attack of fireships that greatly damaged Cao Cao’s fleet and camps. Cao Cao’s army was defeated, and there was also disease ravaging his camps, so he burned his remaining ships and retreated north.87

During the end of 208 and 209, Zhou Yu and Liu Bei followed up by capturing most of Cao Cao’s now untenable garrisons in Jing Province, while in the furthest south in Jiao Province, the local warlord Shi Xie88 transferred his allegiance to Sun Quan in 210, so that all the south was essentially lost to Cao Cao. At this stage Zhou Yu proposed to complete the conquest of all the south by seizing Yi Province, but in 210 he died of illness. The greater part of Jing Province fell under the control of Liu Bei, which Zhou Yu’s successor Lu Su was compelled to acknowledge,89 and Sun Quan’s opportunities for further expansion west became limited.

2.8 The Settlement of the West

Cao Cao had suffered a setback in the south but attacks northward by Sun Quan and Liu Bei similarly led to only limited success. For a time, this southern frontier stabilized, and Cao Cao turned his attention westward, toward the many petty warlords in western Shu and Liang Province, and Zhang Lu90 in Hanzhong.

In early 211, Cao Cao announced a campaign against Zhang Lu, but to reach that territory, he would need to pass through the Wei river valley in western Shu. There the local warlords gathered under the leadership of Ma Chao91 in opposition, but they were decisively defeated and driven west into Liang Province. In 212, Cao Cao returned east to attempt another attack on Sun Quan, leaving his officer Xiahou Yuan92 to continue operations into Liang Province. Ma Chao was able to rebuild his strength and drive Xiahou Yuan back, but the local officials rebelled against his harsh rule, so that Xiahou Yuan was able to defeat him. In 214, Ma Chao fled to take refuge with Zhang Lu in Hanzhong, while Xiahou Yuan continued westward to restore control over Liang Province. The northwest was thus largely settled, much to the anxiety of those in the southwest.

Previously in 188, when the Emperor Ling had begun to appoint Governors, Liu Yan,93 a distant cadet of the Imperial Family, had been appointed to Yi Province in the southwest. Once there, he tacitly allowed Zhang Lu to take control of Hanzhong, thus cutting off the major lines of communication between Yi Province and the capital and allowing Liu Yan to rule independently. In 194 he died and was succeeded by his son Liu Zhang. However, Liu Zhang was a weak ruler, and in 209 Zhou Yu proposed moving up the Yangzi to conquer Yi Province. Liu Bei however opposed this plan, citing his distant kinship to Liu Zhang.

87 For a more complete account see the biography of Zhou Yu in SGZ 54 and de Crespigny “Red Cliffs,” Generals of the South 264-286. As de Crespigny argues, the romantic tradition has distorted and somewhat exaggerated the importance of the campaign.
88 Shi Xie (137 – 226) has biography in SGZ 49.
89 Sun Quan would later make the claim that Liu Bei’s territories in Jing Province were loaned to him, but the deal may have been an acknowledgement by Sun Quan and Lu Su that they could not challenge Liu Bei’s position directly.
90 Zhang Lu (d. 216) has biography in SGZ 8.
91 Ma Chao (176 – 222) has biography in SGZ 36.
92 Xiahou Yuan (d. 219) has biography in SGZ 9.
93 Liu Yan (d. 194) and his son Liu Zhang have biographies in SGZ 31.
In fact, he was already in communication with malcontents in Liú Zhāng’s regime and very likely making his own designs on the southwest.94

In 211, worried by Cáo Cāo’s recent successes in the west, Liú Zhāng invited Liú Bèi into Yi Province, to take command of an expedition against Zhāng Lù to secure Yi Province’s north. Once in Yi Province, Liú Bèi worked to gather support and spread his influence, but by 212 had made no move against Zhāng Lù, and in fact requested soldiers and supplies to return east to support Sūn Quán against Cáo Cāo. Liú Zhāng, concerned with Liú Bèi’s power, only sent part of the request, and Liú Bèi used this as justification to turn on Liú Zhāng. In 214, as Liú Bèi gathered reinforcements from Jīng Province and was joined by Mā Chāo, who had left Zhāng Lù to seek opportunities elsewhere, Liú Zhāng surrendered to Liú Bèi.

While Liú Bèi had expanded west into Yi Province, Sūn Quán had far less success in the east. Though he successfully resisted Cáo Cāo’s attacks in 212 and 214, Sūn Quán’s own attacks northward were similarly resisted by Cáo Cāo’s defenses, and the region between the Huái and Yángzǐ rivers became a desolate no-man’s land where neither side could make lasting gains. In 215, Sūn Quán turned his attention back west, stating that he had loaned the territories of Jīng Province to Liú Bèi, and requesting their return now that Liú Bèi had established himself in Yi Province. Though both sides mobilized their forces, a compromise was reached in which Jīng Province was largely divided between them, which left neither side satisfied.95

Cáo Cāo had attempted two major eastern campaigns against Sūn Quán without a breakthrough, and in 215 he returned west to deal with Zhāng Lù, who was defeated and surrendered. Leaving Xiàhóu Yuān in the west, Cáo Cāo returned east and attempted another eastern campaign against Sūn Quán in 216. The next year he withdrew again, but left a large force commanded by his officer Xiàhóu Dūn96 in the southeast to maintain military pressure; Sūn Quán made a formal surrender to have this force removed, so for a time there was peace on that front.97

While Cáo Cāo was engaged in the east, Liú Bèi led a campaign into Hánzhōng,98 without control of this strategic territory, his regime in Yi Province would be vulnerable from the north. Xiàhóu Yuān was able to repulse these early probes, but in 218 Liú Bèi fully committed to taking Hánzhōng and mobilized all available forces. Recognizing the danger, Cáo Cāo personally went west, but before he arrived, in the spring of 219, Liú Bèi scored a decisive victory, killing Xiàhóu Yuān. Unable to dislodge Liú Bèi, Cáo Cāo evacuated the local population and conceded the territory.

2.9 Foundations of Three Kingdoms

Even as he was engaged in his many campaigns, Cáo Cāo remained heavily involved in government as Chancellor to the Hán Empire, pushing through reforms and restoring good order, but also steadily bolstering his own political power. In 213, following his success against Mā Chāo and the western warlords, Cáo Cāo was given extraordinary title as Duke of Wèi. Meanwhile, the Empress was found to have plotted against Cáo Cāo, and in 214 she was deposed and died in prison,99 while Cáo Cāo arranged to have three...
of his daughters married to the Emperor, one of which became the new Empress. In 216, following the surrender of Zhāng Lǔ, he was advanced to King of Wèi, and accrued additional honors so that by 217, he had reached ceremonial parity with the Emperor himself.

In 219 however, Liú Bèi styled himself King of Hànzhōng in commemoration of his victory. His officer Guān Yǔ, whom he had left in charge of his holdings in Jīng Province, led an attack north, besieging Cáo Cāo’s officer Cáo Rén. A sudden flood of the Hàn river destroyed a relief force commanded by Cáo Cāo’s officer Yú Jīn and left Cáo Rén isolated and trapped, and as Guān Yǔ threatened to link up with local malcontents about the region of the capital of Xū there was serious discussion about evacuating the Emperor. However, a second relief force commanded by Xū Huāng successfully defeated and drove Guān Yǔ away.

Meanwhile, Sūn Quán’s officer Lǚ Méng, who had succeeded Lǔ Sù, took advantage of Guān Yǔ’s absence to seize control over Liú Bèi’s holdings in Jīng Province. He made a show of benevolent leadership, so that as Guān Yǔ returned south his army deserted him, and as Guān Yǔ attempted to flee west he was captured and killed. Early in 220, Sūn Quán sent Guān Yǔ’s head to Cáo Cāo.

At this stage, the frontiers of the Three Kingdoms had been established. Cáo Cāo as King of Wèi controlled the greater parts of former Jī, Bīng, Qīng, Yōu, Yān, Xū, Sīlī, and Liáng Provinces, the northern part of the Hàn Empire. Liú Bèi had been reduced to Yì Province in the southwest. Sūn Quán controlled the south, the greater parts of former Jīng, Yányáng, and Jiāo Provinces. But despite the de facto division, there was still an Emperor of Hàn, and the Empire of Hàn still existed in name, at least for a little while longer.

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100 See de Crespigny “Imperial Consorts,” Imperial Warlord 397-400.
101 The title King (wáng) is also rendered as Prince by some translations.
102 Cáo Rén (168 – 223) has biography in SGZ 9.
103 Yú Jīn (d. 221) has biography in SGZ 17.
104 Xū Huāng (d. 227) has biography in SGZ 17.
105 Lǚ Méng (178 – 220) has biography in SGZ 54.
106 The actual administrative divisions system was greatly restructured and changed over the course of the civil war, but the old system of Hàn before its downfall is still used here for the ease of the reader.
Figure 4. Three Kingdoms. The frontiers between the three kingdoms (in red) are approximate and shifted over time. Each of the Three Kingdoms revised their administrative divisions, but this map shows the former provinces of Hàn for convenient comparison between the Three Kingdoms and Hàn.
3 THREE KINGDOMS (220 – 280)

3.1 THE HÀN-WĒI TRANSITION

On the 15th of March 220, the King of Wēi, Cáo Cāo, died in Luoyáng. To the end of his life, he had refused proposals that he end the Hàn Dynasty and become Emperor himself.\(^{107}\)

Cáo Cāo’s eldest surviving son Cáo Pī\(^ {108}\) succeeded as King of Wēi, as well as to his father’s former position as Chancellor in the Hàn Imperial government. Near the end of 220, the question of the fate of Hàn was brought up yet again, and Cáo Pī took a different approach from his father. On November 25th the last Emperor of Hàn Liū Xié issued an edict abdicating the throne to Cáo Pī, and after some debates and ceremonial refusals, Cáo Pī ascended as Emperor of Wēi on December 11th 220.\(^ {109}\)

As news of Hàn’s end arrived, Liū Bèi claimed Imperial title for himself on May 15th 221 as a continuation of Hàn;\(^ {110}\) his rivals and enemies however referred to his regime as Shū, an old name for the southwestern region in which he was based, denying the legitimacy of his claims. Despite the antagonism with Wēi over competing Imperial claims, Liū Bèi’s first concern was instead on attacking Sūn Quán to recapture Jing Province. As Liū Bèi attacked down the Yángzī, Sūn Quán made formal surrender to the new regime of Wēi to ensure its neutrality, and Cáo Pī rewarded him with title as King of Wū. However, after Liū Bèi was defeated by Sūn Quán’s officer Lǚ Xùn\(^ {111}\) in 222, Sūn Quán was quick to renounce his allegiance to Wēi, ruling as King of Wū in his own right. Sūn Quán successfully resisted Cáo Pī’s punitive campaigns, and by 223 had restored alliance with Liū Bèi, who died later that year. Cáo Pī continued to attack Wū over the next few years, but in 226 he suddenly died of illness as well.

3.2 WŪ AND THE EMPIRE IN THE SOUTH

On June 23rd 229, Sūn Quán claimed Imperial title as Emperor of Wū. His claim was relatively eccentric, lacking in continuity when compared to Cáo Pī receiving Liū Xié’s abdication or Liū Bèi claiming to continue Hàn by family connection.\(^ {112}\) However, he was ruling a strong regime with secure frontiers, and he was an older and far more experienced ruler than either Liū Bèi’s son Liū Shàn or Cáo Pī’s son Cáo Ruì.

Sūn Quán proved an active ruler and pursued many ambitious projects, but these achieved few lasting successes. The stalemate with the north continued, with neither Wēi nor Wū able to achieve a breakthrough of the other’s defensive lines despite near constant aggressive campaigning. In the early 230s, Sūn Quán sought to take the Gōngsūn warlord state in the Liáodōng peninsula as vassal to threaten Wēi’s rear, but communication across such distances proved impractical, and in 238 Wēi destroyed the Gōngsūn regime with Wū unable to intervene. Worse still, Sūn Quán’s final decades of government were

\(^{107}\) SGZ 1 and its annotations includes the debates surrounding such proposals to end the Hàn Dynasty and Cáo Cāo’s decision not to take title as Emperor.

\(^{108}\) Cáo Pī (187 – 226), posthumously Wēi Emperor Wén, has annals in SGZ 2.

\(^{109}\) A detailed account on the abdication debates and ceremonies is given in SGZ 2 and discussed in Goodman, Ts’ao P’ǐ Transcendent.

\(^{110}\) There were also false reports that the former Emperor Liū Xié had been killed by Cáo Pī, likely also used by Liū Bèi to justify his ascension. In fact, Liū Xié was sent into honored retirement and outlived Cáo Pī.

\(^{111}\) Lǚ Xùn (183 – 245) has biography in SGZ 58.

\(^{112}\) See the discussion in de Crespigny “Parity of esteem,“ Generals of the South 448-462.
plagued with factionalism, especially over the succession. In 241, Sun Quan’s eldest son and heir Sun Deng died, and though the next surviving son Sun He was then established as heir, a strong faction rallied around Sun He’s younger brother Sun Ba.113 The infighting badly damaged and destabilized the regime, and in 250, Sun Quan deposed Sun He and forced Sun Ba’s suicide, appointing his seventh and youngest son Sun Liang,114 a child of about seven, as heir. In 252, Sun Quan died, and Sun Liang ascended under the regency of Zhuge Ke.115

The instability and intrigue naturally continued and in 253 Zhuge Ke was assassinated and replaced by Sun Jun, a cadet of the Imperial family. Sun Jun himself suddenly died of illness in 256 and was succeeded by his cousin Sun Chen.116 In 257, Sun Liang attempted to remove his overly powerful regent, but was deposed and replaced by Sun Quan’s sixth son Sun Xiao.117 A few months later Sun Xiao led his own coup, killing Sun Chen and retaking control of the government.

By this stage, however, the authority of Wu had been badly weakened. Sun Xiao proved a weak ruler, and as the central government had been plagued by political infighting, power was dispersed through the established local gentry families, so that Wu, much like Han in its own final years, was unable to fully control and mobilize the resources of its nominal Empire due to the power of local interests.118

Nevertheless, Wu would leave an important and lasting impact on history through its development of the south. During Han the south had been largely frontier territory, and it was under Wu that it was developed into prosperous territory that could support the Southern Dynasties in the later centuries of division.119

3.3 Shu and the Claimed Restoration of Han

At Liu Bei’s death in 223, his son Liu Shan20 was about seventeen, and power was instead held by the Chancellor Zhuge Liang. After restoring the alliance with Wu, Zhuge Liang first campaigned south in 224 to settle the local tribes in Yi Province, so that in 227 he could turn his attention north against Wei. For the rest of his career he led several major campaigns from Hanzhong northward into Wei’s western territories, but he was unable to break Wei’s lines of defense, right up to his death in 234.121

For a while Zhuge Liang’s successor Jiang Wan and Jiang Wan’s successor Fei Yi were occupied with rebuilding strength and internal troubles, but Fei Yi was assassinated in 253, and Fei Yi’s successor Jiang Wei again focused on northern campaigns against Wei.122 He was unable to achieve a breakthrough, and as Shu was exhausted by its constant aggression, Wei under the control of the Sima family launched a

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113 The non-reigning sons of Sun Quan have biographies in SGZ 59.
114 Sun Liang (243 – 260) has biography in SGZ 48.
115 Zhuge Ke (203 – 253) has biography in SGZ 64.
116 Sun Jun (219 – 256) and Sun Chen (232 – 259) have biographies in SGZ 64. They were great-grandsons of Sun Jian’s younger brother.
117 Sun Xiao (235 – 264), posthumously Wu Emperor Jing, has biography in SGZ 48.
118 See de Crespigny “Patterns in the later history of Wu (230-280),” Generals of the South, 479-493.
119 As de Crespigny remarks: “Sun Quan deserves great credit. He inherited a provincial warlord state, he developed it into a centre of culture and power, and he laid new foundations for the future of China.” See de Crespigny “The achievement of Wu,” Generals of the South, 513-532.
120 Liu Shan (207 – 271) has biography in SGZ 33.
121 Zhuge Liang’s northern campaigns are detailed in his biography in SGZ 35.
122 Jiang Wan (d. 246), Fei Yi (d. 253), and Jiang Wei (202 – 264) have biographies in SGZ 44.
major invasion in 263, commanded by Zhōng Hui, Dēng Ài, and others. As Dēng Ài led a march through the wilderness to attack the capital Chéngdū by surprise, Liú Shān went out and surrendered. In 264, Zhōng Hui, attempted to ally with the surrendered Jiāng Wéi to take control over the conquered region to rebel against the Sīmā family, but the plot failed, and the conspirators were killed. Liú Shān was sent north to Luòyáng into honored retirement with title as a Duke.

Despite the ambitious claims to restoration of Hán, the government in Shǔ remained a warlord regime based in a single province, and it failed to develop its own territory on the scale that Wú had achieved in its own. The main legacy of Shǔ would instead be the legends surrounding Liú Bèi and his supporters, which grew from his remarkable story that began on the northern frontier, stretched across almost the entire fallen Empire and involved almost every major warlord of the time, and finally ended in the southwest.

3.4 Wèi and the Rise of the Sīmā Family

As Cáo Pi lay dying in 226, he hastily declared his eldest son Cáo Rú as his heir, and appointed a council of regency, consisting of Chén Qún, Cáo Zhēn, Cáo Xiū, and Sīmā Yì; all four were personally close with Cáo Pi and experienced officers who had served since the time of Cáo Cáo.

However, as Cáo Xiū died in 228, Cáo Zhēn in 231, Chén Qún in 237, Sīmā Yì inherited position as the most senior minister and military commander in Wèi. He gained military experience and prestige first on the southern front in defending against Wú, then as Cáo Zhēn’s successor as commander of the western front defending against Shǔ, and finally in 238 he commanded the campaign that conquered and destroyed Gōngsūn Yuān’s warlord state in the Liáodōng peninsula in the northeast.

Cáo Rú died suddenly of illness in his early thirties on the first day of the lunar new year in 239, with an adopted heir aged only seven, Cáo Fāng. On his death bed, Cáo Rú had initially considered following his father’s example of appointing a council of regency, but was finally persuaded to install only two men, Cáo Zhēn’s son Cáo Shuāng and Sīmā Yì. The decision would have fatal consequences.

Though the two regents initially cooperated, a rift developed based on opposing ideologies. Reformers and ambitious intellectuals gathering around Cáo Shuāng, while the conservatives and established great clans supported Sīmā Yì, who was himself of a prestigious gentry family. In 249, as Cáo Shuāng accompanied the Emperor on a visit to the tomb of Cáo Rú at Gāoping, Sīmā Yì raised troops in a sudden coup d’état. Lured by promises they would only be divested of political power and allowed to retire, Cáo Shuāng and associates surrendered, whereupon Sīmā Yì had them all killed and their clans exterminated.

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123 Zhōng Hui (225 – 264) and Dēng Ài (d. 264) have biographies in SGZ 28.
124 The appraisal at the end of SGZ 33 includes a remarkable claim that the Shǔ government did not even maintain a proper record-keeping department to maintain regular archives.
125 See the discussion in de Crespigny, “The Three Kingdoms and Western Jin” 23-24.
126 Cáo Rú (206 – 239), posthumously Wèi Emperor Míng, has annals in SGZ 3.
127 Chén Qún (d. 237) has biography in SGZ 22. Cáo Zhēn (d. 231) and Cáo Xiū (d. 228) were distant relatives of Cáo Pi and have biographies in SGZ 9. Sīmā Yì (179 – 251), posthumously Jin Emperor Xuān, has annals in Jinshū (JS) 1.
128 Cáo Fāng (232 – 274) has annals in SGZ 4.
129 Cáo Shuāng (d. 249) has biography in SGZ 9.
130 The rise of the Sīmā family is given in detail by Leban, “The Accession of Sima Yan.”
131 See the discussion in de Crespigny, “The Three Kingdoms and Western Jin” 33-34.
In 251, the general Wáng Ling in his headquarters at Shòuchūn in the southeast was discovered to have plotted to replace the child Cáo Fāng with the mature Cáo Biāo, and Simā Yi attacked Wáng Ling by surprise. Wáng Ling killed himself and Cáo Biāo was forced to commit suicide. Simā Yi died soon after, but the control of the Simā family was maintained as the regency passed to his eldest son Simā Shī.

In 254, Lì Fēng and other supporters of the Emperor plotted to overthrow Simā Shī and replace him with Xiàhóu Xuán, but the matter leaked and Simā Shī had all involved executed. Due to Cáo Fāng’s complicity in the plot, Simā Shī deposed him. A grandson of Cáo Pī, the thirteen-year-old Cáo Máo, was selected as successor. In 255, the general Guǎnquī Jiān and others led a second rebellion based in Shòuchūn against the Simā, but Wú, struggling with its own internal troubles, was unable to take advantage of this opportunity on the southeastern front, and Simā Shī successfully crushed the rebellion and repulsed Wú’s attacks. However, the exertion aggravated an already ill Simā Shī, and he died soon after, with the regency passing to his younger brother Simā Zhāo.

In 257, Zhūgē Dàn led the third rebellion of Shòuchūn, but though he held out for over a year and actively sought support from Wú, once again Wú proved incapable of taking advantage. Zhūgē Dàn was killed, and the Simā’s control of the Huái river valley was restored and confirmed.

In 260, the young Emperor Cáo Máo personally made a last desperate attempt to retake power by leading his personal troops in a surprise attack on Simā Zāo, but his plan was betrayed, and he was killed in the fighting. A last puppet Emperor, Cáo Huán, was selected, and Simā Zāo faced no more serious opposition within Wèi, so that in 263 he was able to focus on the conquest of Shū.

Of the three claimant successors of Hàn, Wèi came the closest to regaining its glory. However, in the long term the ruling Cáo family, originating from lesser lineage and weakened by the early deaths of Cáo Pī and Cáo Rúi, failed to maintain the loyalty of the established great clans and their local interests. Consequently, the Simā family, a representative of the great clans, was able to seize power.

3.5 The Wèi–Jín Transition and Reunification of the Empire (265 – 280)
In 264, with the conquest of Shū and suppression of Zhōng Huí’s rebellion, Simā Zāo’s authority was sufficiently established for him to take title as King of Jín, and after his death in 265, his son Simā Yán arranged for the abdication of Cáo Huán. On 4 February 266, the Mandate was formally passed from Wèi to Jín, closely modeled after the transition of Hàn to Wèi some forty-five years earlier.

While Shū was eliminated and Wèi replaced by Jín, Wú was dealing with inner turmoil and rebellion in the far south. After Sūn Xiū died in 264, the struggling Wú government ignored Sūn Xiū’s young sons and

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132 Wáng Ling (d. 251) has biography in SGZ 28.
133 Cáo Biāo (195 – 251) was a son of Cáo Cáo and has biography in SGZ 20.
134 Simā Shī (208 – 255), posthumously Jin Emperor Jīng, has annals in JS 2.
135 The plot is detailed in the biography of Xiàhóu Xuán (209 – 254) in SGZ 9.
136 Cáo Máo (251 – 260) has annals in SGZ 4.
137 The rebellion is detailed in the biography of Guǎnquī Jiān (d. 255) in SGZ 28.
138 Simā Zāo (211 – 265), posthumously Jin Emperor Wén, has annals in JS 2.
139 The rebellion is detailed in the biography of Zhūgē Dàn (d. 258) in SGZ 28.
140 Cáo Huán (246 – 302), posthumously Wèi Emperor Yuán, was a grandson of Cáo Cáo and has annals in SGZ 4.
141 Simā Yán (236 – 290), posthumously Jin Emperor Wú, has annals in JS 3.
enthroned Sun Hao,142 a grandson of Sun Quan, in hopes that a mature ruler might reverse the fortunes of the ailing state. Indeed, Sun Hao’s regime was able to suppress the rebellions in Jiao and repulse Jin’s advances in that region, but Sun Hao himself soon gained a reputation for suspicion and brutality, and likewise failed to hold the loyalty of Wu’s great clans.

Jin steadily built its strength over the next decade, and in the spring of 280 it launched its offensive, sending a large fleet east down the Yangzi river in coordination with massive southward attacks, destroying Wu’s defenses. On 1 May 280, the last defenders of the capital deserted, and Sun Hao went out to surrender. He was sent into honored retirement with the title Lord of Guiming, or “the Lord of submitting to the Mandate.”

3.6 The Downfall of Jin and the Legacy of the Three Kingdoms

The Romance ends with the final unification under Jin, giving a false impression that the story of the Three Kingdoms resulted in the fulfillment of its opening statement: “Long united must divide, long divided must unite.” In fact, the division of the Three Kingdoms was only the first phase in a far longer period of disunity, with the unification of Jin a mere temporary interruption.143 A lasting unification would not be achieved until 589 by the Sui dynasty.

In 290, Sima Yan died. His son Sima Zhong144 was a weak and possibly developmentally disabled ruler, and from 290 to 307 the Consort Families and Cadet Branches of the Sima Family fought for power in what became known as the Chaos of the Eight Kings.145 Several of the warring factions had used barbarian auxiliaries, and with the severely weakened state of the Jin Empire, some of these groups openly declared their own regimes. The whole of the north and west was overrun, leaving a distant cadet of the Imperial Family, Sima Rui,146 to declare a Jin rump state in the southeast, in the former territory of Wu. There, the protection of the Yangzi and foundations laid down by Wu allowed long term survival against the north in military terms just as Wu had survived against Wei. However, it did little against the threats of political intrigue and instability, and the precedent of the Han-Wei and Wei-Jin transitions led to a string of usurpations in these southern dynasties, from Jin to Song, Song to Qi, Qi to Liang, and finally Liang to Chen.

In 589, four hundred years after the collapse of Han Imperial authority in 189, Chen was conquered by the northern regime of Sui, its Emperor Yang Jian147 at last achieving the long-thwarted dream of unification.

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142 Sun Hao (243 – 284) has biography in SGZ 48.
143 See the discussion in de Crespigny “What Went Wrong,” Fire Over Luoyang 480-509.
144 Sima Zhong (259 – 307), posthumously Jin Emperor Huai, has annals in JS 4.
145 See de Crespigny, “The Three Kingdoms and Western Jin” part II, 152-161.
146 Sima Rui (276 – 323), posthumously Jin Emperor Yuan has annals in JS 6.
147 Yang Jian (541 – 604), posthumously Sui Emperor Wen, has annals in Suishu (SuiS) 1-2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AD</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>189</td>
<td>Emperor Líng dies; Dǒng Zhuó seizes control of Luòyáng, enthrones Liú Xié as Emperor Gōngsūn Dù takes control of Liáodōng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>190</td>
<td>Coalition forms against Dǒng Zhuó; Dǒng Zhuó evacuates the Emperor west to Cháng’ān</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>191</td>
<td>Coalition breaks apart; Yuán Shào takes control of Ji Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>192</td>
<td>Dǒng Zhuó assassinated by Lǚ Bù; Lǐ Jué et al take control of Cháng’ān</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>194</td>
<td>Zhāng Miǎo rebels against Cáo Cāo and invites Lǚ Bù into Yān Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>195</td>
<td>Cáo Cāo defeats Lǚ Bù and retakes Yān Province; Lǚ Bù flees to Liú Bèi in Xú Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>196</td>
<td>The Emperor escapes Lǐ Jué et al and returns east</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>197</td>
<td>Lǚ Bù seizes control of Xú Province from Liú Bèi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>198</td>
<td>Cáo Cāo defeats Lǚ Bù, settles Xú Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>199</td>
<td>Yuán Shù dies; Liú Bèi seizes control of Xú Province to rebel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200</td>
<td>Cáo Cāo defeats Liú Bèi, who flees to Yuán Shào</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201</td>
<td>Cáo Cāo defeats Yuán Shào’s invasion at Guāndū</td>
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<tr>
<td>202</td>
<td>Liú Bèi flees to Liú Biǎo in Jīng Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>204</td>
<td>Gōngsūn Dù dies, succeeded by his son Gōngsūn Kāng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>205</td>
<td>Cáo Cāo destorys Yuán Tán, settles Qīng Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>207</td>
<td>Cáo Cāo defeats Yuán Shàngh and the Wūhuán; Gōngsūn Kāng kills Yuán Shàngh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>210</td>
<td>Cáo Cāo becomes Duke of Wèi, given the Nine Bestowments</td>
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<tr>
<td>211</td>
<td>Cáo Cāo becomes Duke of Wèi, given the Nine Bestowments</td>
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<tr>
<td>213</td>
<td>Cáo Cāo's officer Xiàhóu Yuān settles Liáng Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>214</td>
<td>Liú Bèi defeats Liú Zhāng, seizes control of Yī Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>215</td>
<td>Cáo Cāo defeats Zhāng Lǔ, conquers Hānzhōng</td>
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<tr>
<td>216</td>
<td>Cáo Cāo promoted to King of Wēi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>217</td>
<td>Cáo Cāo attacks Sūn Quán, who nominally surrenders to restore friendly relations</td>
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<tr>
<td>219</td>
<td>Liú Bèi destroys Xiàhóu Yuān, conquers Hānzhōng, declares himself King of Hānzhōng</td>
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<tr>
<td>219</td>
<td>Sūn Quán’s officer Lǚ Méng captures Jing Province; Guān Yú destroyed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Event</td>
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<tr>
<td>220</td>
<td>Cáo Cāo dies; Emperor of Hán Liú Xié abdicates; Cáo Pī becomes Emperor of Wèi</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Liú Bèi declares himself Emperor of Hán in Shǔ</td>
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<tr>
<td>221</td>
<td>Cáo Pī appoints Sūn Quán King of Wú</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>222</td>
<td>Sūn Quán’s officer Lù Xùn defeats Liú Bèi; Sūn Quán renounces allegiance to Wèi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>223</td>
<td>Liú Bèi dies, succeeded by Liú Shàn, Zhūgĕ Liàng as regent, Shǔ and Wú restore alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>226</td>
<td>Cáo Pī dies, succeeded by Cáo Rúi</td>
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<tr>
<td>228</td>
<td>Zhūgĕ Liàng begins his northern campaigns against Wèi</td>
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<tr>
<td>229</td>
<td>Sūn Quán declares himself Emperor of Wú</td>
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<tr>
<td>232</td>
<td>Sūn Quán exchanges envoys with Gōngsūn Yuān in Liáodōng</td>
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<tr>
<td>234</td>
<td>Zhūgĕ Liàng dies</td>
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<tr>
<td>238</td>
<td>Sīmă Yì destroys Gōngsūn Yuān</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>239</td>
<td>Cáo Rúi dies, succeeded by adopted son Cáo Fāng, Sīmă Yì and Cáo Shuāng as regents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>242</td>
<td>Factionalism over Sūn Quán’s sons Sūn Hé and Sūn Bà begins</td>
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<tr>
<td>249</td>
<td>Sīmă Yì kills Cáo Shuāng and seizes control of Wèi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>251</td>
<td>Wáng Líng’s rebellion; Sīmă Yì dies, succeeded by his son Sīmă Shī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>252</td>
<td>Sūn Quán dies, succeeded by Sūn Liàng, Zhūgĕ Kè as regent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>253</td>
<td>Sūn Jún kills Zhūgĕ Kè and seizes control of Wú</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>254</td>
<td>Sīmă Shī deposes Cáo Fāng, enthrones Cáo Máo; Guànqiū Jiǎn’s rebellion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>255</td>
<td>Sīmă Shī dies, succeeded by his brother Sīmă Zhāo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>256</td>
<td>Sūn Jún dies, succeeded by his cousin Sūn Chēn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>257</td>
<td>Zhūgĕ Dàn’s rebellion</td>
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<tr>
<td>258</td>
<td>Sūn Chēn deposes Sūn Liàng and enthrones Sūn Xiū; Sūn Xiū kills Sūn Chēn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>260</td>
<td>Cáo Máo attempts to retake power and is killed, replaced by Cáo Huán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>263</td>
<td>Sīmă Zhāo sends Zhōng Huì and Dèng Æ to conquer Shǔ; Liú Shàn surrenders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zhōng Huì’s rebellion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>264</td>
<td>Sūn Xiū dies, succeeded by his nephew Sūn Hào</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>265</td>
<td>Sīmă Zhāo dies, succeeded by his son Sīmă Yán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>266</td>
<td>Emperor of Wèi Cáo Huán abdicates, Sīmă Yán becomes Emperor of Jīn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>280</td>
<td>Jīn conquers Wú; Sūn Hào surrenders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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