

Cao Cao's Game of War

Introduction:

“The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide” (p. 1). The objective of this game is to unite China using whatever means necessary. Players may forge alliances through treaties with other players, betray them, barter with them or allow them to destroy each other in true Cao Cao style.

All players should be encouraged to think and play like Cao Cao and remember “better to wrong the world than have it wrong me” (p. 38). Thinking like Cao Cao involves using cold, amoral strategy and deception. If an alliance at some point in the game suits a player’s plans for ultimate victory, he or she should consider it but must be willing to drop it as soon as it no longer furthers their cause; be wary of betrayal from other players and be willing to cut them down like Cao Cao kills Lü Boshe after Lü Boshe provides food and shelter for him (Chapter 4). Similarly, consider causing conflict between the other two players just as Cao Cao’s doctored letter brought about strife between two of his enemies (Chapter 59).

The opening stages of the game are set up to emulate the situation right before the Battle of Red Cliffs so players find themselves in the same strategic predicament, encouraging similar thinking. Wei stands poised with the largest standing army and an incredibly wide and potentially vulnerable border. The kingdom of Wu holds the most territory and as a result is quite wealthy, but its capital of Jianye is exposed on the border with Wei. Shu Han enjoys a very defensible border, but lacks the wealth of Wu or the army of Wei. The game is set up in a way to encourage Shu Han and Wu to form an alliance early on to address Wei’s stronger army; this decision is designed more for game balancing than historical realism, but if either chooses to side

with Wei initially instead of each other, Wei will be unstoppable later on. The long and exposed border encourages Wei to attack early and play aggressively. Again, this decision is less about being faithful to the novel and more about encouraging multi-dimensional strategic thinking to maximize the player's connection to Cao Cao. While in a board game all the players will be playing for personal gain (namely, a win), by setting the game up in this way the game encourages players to follow the general path of the novel and they will be more likely to adopt the roles that each of the leaders of the three kingdoms played. While Cao Cao was a brilliant strategist without moral compunctions, his opponents focused more on personal relationships and, for the kingdoms of Shu Han and Wu to defend and attack effectively, those players would need to build alliances. Just like Romance of the Three Kingdoms, this is a game of diplomacy as much as it is a game of military strategy. Keep in mind that these are simply guidelines meant to develop creative and ruthless thinking. Embody Cao Cao, think differently about all the tools you have at hand!¹

Setup:

All sides start with an infantry unit (square shaped piece) on every border province and a cavalry unit (triangular piece) in the provinces containing their capital. Wei gets an additional cavalry unit in the capital.² Wu starts with 3 units of money, other players start with zero. Hero cards are distributed equally and randomly amongst players and it is their choice whether to show them or keep them secret. A player may not sell or trade hero cards.

¹ Friedman, Ted. "Civilization Essay." Civilization Essay. MIT University. Accessed May 8, 2020. http://web.mit.edu/21w.784/www/BD_Supplementals/Materials/UnitFour/friedman.htm.

² After testing the game with my mother and younger brother, I added the cavalry unit for balancing forces.

How to Play:

Each turn is split into 4 stages: Movement, Combat, Mustering and Taxation. Players take turns going through each of these stages. Hero cards can be used at any time unless there is a limitation stated on the card. The same hero cannot be used twice in the same turn (this rule really only affects Lü Bu because all other hero cards can only be played once).

Movement: The movement phase consists of players moving as many of troops as they would like. Infantry have a movement of 1, meaning that they can move into any adjacent province. Cavalry have a movement of 2, meaning that they can move to one province beyond the adjacent ones. Multiple units can occupy the same province. However, if the armies of two or more players on different sides are in the same province at the end of the movement phase they will go into combat against each other. If an invading army wins the battle, the territory occupied by the enemy units becomes part of the invader's kingdom (unless another combatant can win it) and optionally can be marked with a dry erase marker in order to keep track. If a player's capital city is taken, they must give any money they had to the player who took it and then select another province to function as their capital. Cavalry moving through two enemy provinces can capture both in a turn, if they are not occupied by enemy forces; in such a situation a player may capture territory without engaging in combat.

Combat: Each unit's fighting strength in battle (infantry or cavalry) is represented with a coin. For each unit, opposing players will flip a coin and count how many coins come up as heads. The side with more heads wins that particular round of the battle and the losing side loses

one unit³ (infantry is removed first⁴) per each additional head that the winner flips (eg., 2 heads vs. 3 heads means a removal of one infantry unit). At the end of each round of combat, both sides have the option to retreat to neighboring friendly territory which they already occupy. Combat will continue until one or both sides are destroyed or if a player chooses to retreat.

For example: Wei is attacking Jianye with 2 cavalry and 1 infantry, which is defended by 1 cavalry and 1 infantry. The Wei player flips 3 coins and 2 show heads. The Wu player flips 2 and they both show heads. Neither side takes casualties because they match. They both flip the coins again, Wei has 0 and Wu has 2. Wei loses 1 infantry unit and 1 cavalry unit. The player controlling Wei then decides to retreat to save his last army and moves back into the territory from where he attacked.

Mustering: The mustering phase consists of purchasing new armies. Each new infantry unit costs 2, while cavalry costs 3. Each province can have only one new unit created within it except for capitals, where players can produce as many armies as they wish.⁵ New units cannot be mustered in newly conquered territory. Therefore, if a player chooses to engage in battle, he needs to have enough units to occupy the territory after all the combat is over.

³ While randomness helps enhance strategic thinking as players must plan for potential defeat, this very simple combat system favors larger armies to encourage players to consolidate forces for decisive, large battles like the battle of Red Cliffs. While mounted troops are more dangerous than dismounted troops on the battlefield, I assume a unit of cavalry is smaller than a unit of infantry to simplify combat.

⁴ In the oral storytelling representation of Cao Cao's retreat, we see him and his men hastily wear women's clothing as they desperately escape on horseback. In a battle, those with horses are more likely to escape with their lives. (Børdahl, Vibeke, Feng Mi, and Jinyun Li. Yangzhou Ping Hua Tan Tao = The Oral Tradition of Yangzhou Storytelling. Nanjing: Jiangsu ren min chu ban she, 2016.)

⁵ While money, particularly paper money, is an anachronism, this device is used to streamline the game and represent the grain, metal, animals, political power and many other supplies needed to form an army. However, the requirement of only one unit per province represents the limited pool of recruits to be conscripted into service, except for capital cities which tend to have larger populations. Though Cao Cao's many attempts at persuading Guan Yu to join him with gifts show that buying the support of prominent heroes of the novel is a valid strategy, it also shows that wealth is an important part of political control.

Taxation: During the taxation phase, players will collect 1 money bill per province under their control, excluding newly conquered territory.⁶

Hero Cards:

Obviously, heroes in the game are characters from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms and their abilities are loosely based off of specific scenes. Some may be obvious, others less so. To keep cards relatively small they are all explained here. The actions of all of these characters ultimately decide the fate of Cao Cao and the game reflects their roles.

Lü Bu: When used, Lü Bu adds an additional unit of infantry for a single battle, then the card is given to another player who has not yet played this card, rather than removing him from the game (unlike all other hero cards).

I wanted to poke fun at Lü Bu's constant switching of sides. I pay homage to Lü Bu's legacy as a warrior by making him act as an army of his own.

Diaochan: When used, Diaochan enables a player to steal an enemy general (another hero card) from a player of their choice. After being used, Diaochan is removed from the game. If another player uses Lü Bu during the same round and the player with Diaochan has not already used the Lü Bu card, it is automatically given to this player.

Her role in driving Dong Zhuo and Lü Bu apart made her ability a relatively straightforward choice (Chapter 8). Though the second part of Diaochan's hero card probably does little to change the strategy of the game, I wanted to highlight her connection to Lü Bu.

Zhuge Liang: Representing additional arrow fire in battle, Zhuge Liang allows all your armies (infantry and cavalry) to attack twice in the first round of combat in a single battle. His card is then removed from the game.

Kongming's mastery of strategy ultimately brought about Cao Cao's downfall at Red Cliffs so I wanted to highlight his ability to be decisive and able to severely disrupt other players' plans. Since weather is not part of my game, I chose not to reference Zhuge Liang's supernatural powers, instead referencing the 10,000 arrows incident (Chapter 49, chapter 46).

Liu Bei: When used, two free infantry armies are added to the player's capitol city and become an ongoing part of that player's army. After being used, Liu Bei's card is removed from the game.

I included Liu Bei for multiple reasons. First and foremost, Cao Cao was a mastermind in using his enemies against each other (Guan Yu's downfall, which started in chapter 73, is a great example of Cao Cao's manipulations). Additionally, Liu Bei's ability highlights that he is the "good guy" in the novel, putting him in direct contrast to Cao Cao (in this case represented

⁶ Newly conquered territory has been looted and pillaged, so the land needs time to recover before its occupants can pay taxes once more.

by the other players) who has to buy his armies with promises of goods, rather than fighting for a righteous cause.

The 10 Eunuchs: Collect 50% more taxes in one turn (round upwards to a whole number). After being used, this card is removed from the game.

In an attempt to add variety to the hero abilities, I took artistic liberty to stretch the corruption of the Eunuchs to increase taxes from a player's kingdom. The 10 Eunuchs set in motion the entire plot of Romance of the Three Kingdoms and, as such, deserves a reference (Chapter 3).

Guan Yu: Guan Yu prevents an opponent's single hero card from having an effect. After being used, remove both Guan Yu and the opposing general's card (whose card Guan Yu inactivated).

Given his prestigious legacy, Guan Yu offers many scenes that would be great for ability ideas; I chose Guan Yu's easy defeat of Hua Xiong because this chapter emphasizes Guan Yu's exceptional abilities to defeat other generals and disrupt enemy plans (Chapter 5).

Zhang Jue: When used, one free infantry unit appears in a non-capital enemy province of the player's choice and becomes an ongoing part of that player's army. After being used, Zhang Jiao's card is removed from the game.

Given their critical role in the setting the plot in motion, the Yellow Turbans, like the Eunuchs, needed to make an appearance. I chose Zhang Jue to represent the rebellion mostly as a game balancing tool to prevent players from stacking all of their units into one giant army because it would leave home exposed (Chapter 1).

Zhao Zilong: When used, this card saves one unit that would have been lost following a battle (if this card is played following a defeat, the player places the new unit in an adjacent friendly province). After being used, Liu Bei's card is removed from the game.

Zhao Zilong's iconic scene in chapter 41 in which he engages in battle while he carries a baby results in Cao Cao's demand that Zhao Zilong must be captured alive, makes him an iconic representative of a savior (which also defines his ability) and makes him important enough to Cao Cao to be included as a hero card in the game.

Sun Jian: When used, this card saves one unit that would have been lost following a battle (if this card is played following a defeat, the player places the new unit in an adjacent friendly province). After being used, Liu Bei's card is removed from the game.

Chapter 6 shows the importance of imperial legitimacy in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Towards the end of the novel the emperor's role as a pawn and tool is used by Cao Cao's successors to establish themselves as rulers, with Sun Jian's possession of the seal playing an important role. His ability represents the support of the common people for him, even after they were conquered, because he appears to be a more legitimate ruler.

Zhang Fei: When used, in a single battle one in every three friendly infantry units has the use of an extra coin (round upwards). However, the player loses the option of retreating from that battle. After being used, Zhang Fei's card is removed from the game.

Zhang Fei was one of the most important characters in the novel with his courage and drunkenness inextricably connected. His liquid courage is represented by additional fighting prowess in exchange for losing the option to retreat, demonstrating ferocity but clouded judgement.

Kong Rong: When used, the player using the Kong Rong card and one other player of his/her choice gain +1 in taxes for 4 turns. Keep this card nearby to remember the bonus. Any combat between the two players will stop this bonus from being distributed for that and all following turns. After being used, Kong Rong's card is removed from the game.

Kong Rong, a scholar and political opponent of Cao Cao, is executed in chapter 40. While a lesser character, he makes an appearance in the game because the number of hero cards has to be evenly distributable between three players.

Lady Sun: When used, in a single battle a player's cavalry attacks twice for every round of combat and the enemy may not retreat. After being used, Lady Sun's card is removed from the game.

Filling a similar role to Kong Rong and, like Diaochan, another interesting example of femininity in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, her description in chapter 55 establishes her love of martial arts, highlighted by weapons on the walls of her room and armed maids.

Conclusion:

After testing this game with my mother and little brother, I think it is successful in Friedman's idea of games as a way for character and player to become one. Though my family members are not familiar with the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, they immediately adopted Cao Cao's way of thinking to try to win the game. While our game followed many of the key events and alliances of the novel (including a climactic battle at Red Cliffs), it was ultimately quite different as Zhuge Liang was persuaded to join Wei by Diaochan but the kingdom of Shu Han eventually emerged victorious. I believe the game finds a balance between referencing the history and novel, while being unpredictable enough to encourage players to strategize like Cao Cao. But don't take my word for it, give it a try!

Lü Bu

One-man army

This traitorous warrior was known for his skill in combat. He could turn the tides of battles on his own and no other general could best him, though he could only switch sides so many times.

When used, Lü Bu adds an additional unit of infantry for a single battle, then the card is given to another player who has not yet played this card, rather than removing him from the game (unlike all other hero cards).

Diaochan

Famed Beauty

This famous femme-fatale was famous for sowing discord between Dong Zhuo and Lü Bu as they both desired her.

When used, Diaochan enables a player to steal an enemy general (another hero card) from a player of their choice. After being used, Diaochan is removed from the game.

If another player uses Lü Bu during the same round and the player with Diaochan has not already used the Lü Bu card, it is automatically given to this player.

Zhuge Liang

Strategic Equalizer

Famous for unconventional strategies such as using the hay bales used to collect enemy arrows, Zhuge Liang is a master of trickery and playing by his own rules.

Representing additional arrow fire in battle, Zhuge Liang allows all your armies (infantry and cavalry) to attack twice in the first round of combat in a single battle. His card is then removed from the game.

Liu Bei

Hero of the People

This general placed the good of the common people above himself and all else. His love for the common folk and their support has its benefits.

When used, two free infantry armies are added to the player's capitol city and become an ongoing part of that player's army. After being used, Liu Bei's card is removed from the game.

The 10 Eunuchs

Corrupt Administrators

These treacherous eunuchs helped bring about the fall of the Eastern Han Dynasty, but their greed has its uses.

Collect 50% more taxes in one turn (round up to a whole number). After being used, this card is removed from the game.

Guan Yu

God of War

Lord Guan earned his legacy as a fearsome warrior, after rising up the ranks from a lowly mounted archer. His prowess was proven when he defeated an enemy general in a battle of single combat.

Guan Yu prevents an opponent's single hero card from having an effect. After being used, remove both Guan Yu and the opposing general's card (whose card Guan Yu inactivated).

Zhang Jiao

Peasant Rebel

Rebels, known as the Yellow Turbans, caused chaos across China during the Romance of the Three Kingdoms under the leadership of Zhang Jiao.

When used, one free infantry unit appears in a non-capital enemy province of the player's choice and becomes an ongoing part of that player's army. After being used, Zhang Jiao's card is removed from the game.

Zhao Zilong

Hero of Changshan

This general embodies a hero who protects the powerless when he fulfills his duties to defend Liu Bei's family, earning the admiration of Cao Cao.

When used, this card saves one unit that would have been lost following a battle (if this card is played following a defeat, the player places the new unit in an adjacent friendly province). After being used, Liu Bei's card is removed from the game.

Sun Jian

Bearer of the Emperor's seal

This general's decision to take the Emperor's seal instead of giving it to the coalition ultimately played a role in dooming them. However, Sun Jian's heroics against the Yellow Turbans and possession of the seal bring legitimacy to his actions.

When used, soldiers can be mustered in newly conquered territory for this turn only. After being used, Sun Jian's card is removed from the game.

Zhang Fei

Drunken Warrior

Zhang Fei's bravery, instilled by liquid courage, was legendary throughout the Three Kingdoms.

When used, in a single battle one in every three friendly infantry units has the use of an extra coin (round upwards). However, the player loses the

option of retreating from that battle. After being used, Zhang Fei's card is removed from the game.

Kong Rong

Master Scholar

This lord was a better administrator and scholar than warrior, though both skills are essential for reuniting China. His knowledge of trade and education improve prosperity from commerce.

When used, the player using the Kong Rong card and one other player of his/her choice gain +1 in taxes for 4 turns. Keep this card nearby to remember the bonus. Any combat between the two players will stop this bonus from being distributed for that and all following turns. After being used, Kong Rong's card is removed from the game.

Lady Sun

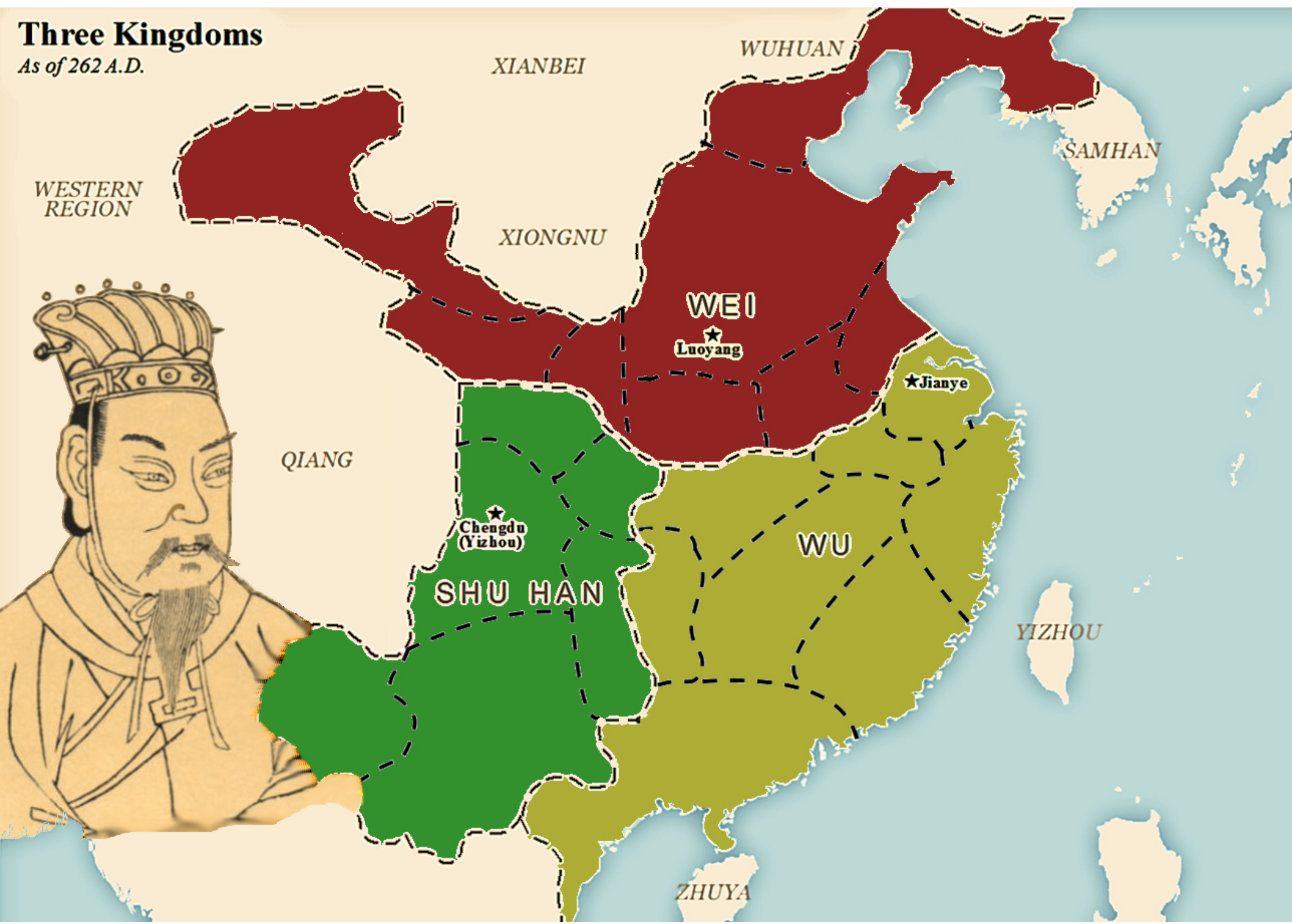
Martial Princess

Liu Bei's wife Lady Sun was known for her love of weapons and martial arts, making them a fitting match. Though not a renowned frontline warrior, she inspires her troops to fight harder.

When used, in a single battle a player's cavalry attacks twice for every round of combat and the enemy may not retreat. After being used, Lady Sun's card is removed from the game.

Three Kingdoms

As of 262 A.D.





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