

A STUDY ON THE IMAGE OF LIU BEI AS A SAGE MONARCH IN TANG POETRY AND ITS DISSEMINATION

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Abstract: Liu Bei's (刘备) portrayal in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 《三国演义》 not only reflects his political wisdom and strategic vision but also highlights his human brilliance and emotional depth. As the sage monarch of the Shu Kingdom, Liu Bei's historical image in traditional culture often intertwines with his portrayal in Tang poetry, especially in showcasing his benevolence, magnanimity, and national righteousness. In Tang dynasty poetry, Liu Bei's image as a sage monarch is manifested as both a ruler of loyalty and righteousness and a leader of heroes. Together with Zhuge Liang (诸葛亮), they established a paradigm of sage monarch and virtuous minister in Chinese history; however, his image is also tinged with tragic elements. The dissemination of Liu Bei's image across different times, groups, and channels in Tang poetry provided a broad stage and background for his portrayal. This image construction is closely intertextual with the political demands of the Tang dynasty after the An Shi Rebellion. This multidimensional analysis of Liu Bei's image enriches historical understanding and offers insight into the complexities of loyalty, ideological aspirations, and their interplay with political reality. The examination of Liu Bei's sage monarch image and its dissemination holds both historical significance and contemporary relevance.

Keywords: *Tang Poetry; Liu Bei; Sage Monarch Image; Dissemination; Historical Memory;*

The depiction of Liu Bei in *Records of the Three Kingdoms* 《三国志》 and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 《三国演义》 highlights his political acumen and strategic foresight, as well as his humanistic brilliance and profound emotional depth. The profound bond between Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang is aptly captured in Du Fu's verse: "A ruler and his minister must work together; sages and saints emerge in unison" (Peng et al., 1960). This relationship is not merely a product of political strategy but also an embodiment of ideals and loyalty, exemplifying the paradigm of the sage monarch and virtuous minister. Liu Bei's leadership, ground-

ed in benevolence, earned him widespread support and enhanced his governing capabilities. Throughout history, Liu Bei's image has subtly become an admired model for later generations, inspiring a steadfast pursuit of ideals and convictions. Among the 136 extant Tang poems centered on the Three Kingdoms, 40 focus on Zhuge Liang, whereas only six are dedicated to Liu Bei (Zhu, 1983). Scholarly research on Tang poetry has extensively examined Zhuge Liang's portrayal, whereas Liu Bei's image remains largely underexplored, leading to a pronounced asymmetry in the historical and contemporary dissemination of this ruler-minister archetype. This study seeks to analyze Liu Bei's image as a sage monarch and its dissemination, addressing this research gap to a certain extent.

1. Liu Bei's Image in Tang Poetry

When discussing the culture of the Three Kingdoms, Tan Liangxiao summarized it with four key concepts: "loyalty and righteousness" (忠义), "brave and valiant" (勇武), "wisdom" (智慧), and "unification" (统一). He emphasized that the values, ideals, and ethos expressed in Three Kingdoms culture transcend eras and borders, are widely celebrated, and will continue to be passed down through generations (Tan, 2024). As the sage monarch of the Shu Kingdom, Liu Bei's historical image in traditional culture often overlaps with his portrayal in Tang poetry, especially in depictions of his benevolence, magnanimity, and commitment to the greater moral duty of serving the nation. Accordingly, Liu Bei is worthy of praise, and his moral character deserves further dissemination.

As a key medium for ancient Chinese literati to express emotions and ideals, Tang poetry includes numerous works consistent with Liu Bei's image. Liu Bei's image in Tang poetry involves not only his historical characterization but also the emotional and cultural connotations associated with it. Through analysis of representative Tang poems, the complex emotional projections and social values associated with Liu Bei as a historical figure in the Tang poetic imagination can be examined.

The image of Liu Bei is richly expressed throughout the lines of Tang poetry. Tang dynasty poets, through the unique medium of verse, constructed a multifaceted image of Liu Bei, who gradually evolved in the historical imagination into a figure marked by emotional complexity and sincere humanity. The image of Liu Bei in Tang poetry is frequently associated with loyalty and righteousness. In Tang poetic depictions, Liu Bei's representation as a sage monarch often complements the strategic intelligence of Zhuge Liang. Their relationship reflects profound camaraderie and shared ideals. Liu Bei is portrayed not only as appreciative of Zhuge Liang's talent but also as invested in cultivating their emotional bond. In *Upon Reading the Biography of Zhuge Liang, the Marquis of Martial Valor, and Expressing Sentiments: A Dedication to the Brothers of Magistrate Cui Shufeng in Chang'an* 《读诸葛武侯传书怀赠长安崔少府叔封昆季》, Li Bai writes: "鱼水三顾合, 风云四海生" ("The three visits joined ruler and subject like fish and water; from their union, the storm stirred the four seas") (Peng & Wang, 1960,

1735). This verse vividly conveys Liu Bei's respect for Zhuge Liang and emphasizes the enduring value of their ruler-minister bond. In Cen Shen's *Temple of the Former Lord and Marquis Wu* 《先主武侯庙》, the poet writes: “先主与武侯, 相逢云雷际。感通君臣分, 义激鱼水契。遗庙空萧然, 英灵贯千岁。” (“The Former Lord and the Marquis met amid thunder and cloud; their understanding as ruler and minister moved the world, their bond stirred the loyalty of fish and water. The empty temple stands in silence; their heroic spirits endure for a thousand years”) (Peng & Wang, 1960, 2043). This poem articulates the profound emotional connection between Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang and affirms Liu Bei's loyalty and righteousness. The line “感通君臣分” (“their understanding as ruler and minister”) emphasizes their mutual trust and tacit understanding, demonstrating a shared determination to advance together amid political upheaval. The phrase “义激鱼水契” (“their bond stirred the loyalty of fish and water”) employs a vivid metaphor to express the inseparability of their relationship, evoking deep emotional resonance. This metaphor not only captures the emotional depth of their bond but also reflects the cultural value placed on righteousness (义气) in premodern society and the broader recognition of loyalty and collaboration. In Wang Zun's *Nanyang* 《南阳》, the poet writes: “若非先主垂三顾, 谁识茅庐一卧龙” (“Had the Former Lord not bowed in three visits, who would have known the crouching dragon in the thatched hut?”) (Peng & Wang, 1960, 6955). The poem affirms Liu Bei's earnest effort to recruit talent for national service while also lamenting the frustration of gifted individuals in times of turmoil. As a hero committed to restoring the Han dynasty, Liu Bei's loyalty and righteousness were magnified in Tang poetry, serving as a vehicle for emotional resonance among literati. Through the poetic medium, Tang literati expressed admiration for Liu Bei's perseverance and framed him as a symbol of loyalty and idealism, reflecting their veneration of historical heroism. As stated in the fourth poem of Du Fu's *Five Poems on Historical Sites That Stir Reflection* 《咏怀古迹五首》: “In the ancient temple, firs and pines shelter cranes by the water; during seasonal offerings at the end of the year, villagers come forth. The shrine of the Marquis always stands nearby; ruler and minister are worshipped as one” (Peng & Wang, 1960, 2511). The verse reflects the enduring ritual practice of joint commemoration of Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang during annual festivals.

In Tang poetry, Liu Bei is portrayed not only as a leader of deep emotional commitment and loyalty but also as a heroic sovereign imbued with a commanding spirit. Throughout his life, he endured numerous hardships and setbacks yet remained committed to his aspirations for the future, ultimately founding the Shu Kingdom, which stood as one of the three powers alongside Wei and Wu. This inner resilience and sense of purpose were vividly articulated by Tang poets, who emphasized Liu Bei's unyielding spirit in the face of adversity. In *Temple of the Former Lord of Shu* 《蜀先主庙》, Liu Yuxi writes: “天地英雄气, 千秋尚凛然。势分三足鼎, 业复五铢钱” (“The heroic spirit fills heaven and earth; even after a thousand autumns, it remains awe-inspiring. Power was divided like a tripod cauldron; his enterprise revived the Five-Zhu coinage”) (Peng & Wang, 1960,

4016). This not only reflects Liu Bei's heroic presence but also alludes to his steadfast conviction amid political turbulence. The line “天地英雄气” highlights the noble character and grand ambitions of a hero, while “千秋尚凛然” conveys an enduring spirit that transcends temporal boundaries, underscoring Liu Bei's lasting significance in the course of history. The heroic figure represented by Liu Bei during the Three Kingdoms period became a vital source of inspiration for later literary works.

Liu Bei's heroic image is vividly embodied in his efforts to establish the Shu state. Tang poets rendered detailed portrayals of this image. In Hu Zeng's *Historical Poems: Nanyang* 《咏史诗·南阳》, he writes: “世乱英雄百战余，孔明方此乐耕锄” (“In a world in chaos, the hero remained after a hundred battles; meanwhile, Kongming delighted in plowing his fields”)(Peng & Wang, 1960, 7421). In an era marked by relentless warfare and instability, Liu Bei is portrayed as one capable of assessing circumstances and responding with strategic flexibility, often identifying the optimal course amid complexity. His heroic stature is reflected not only in martial prowess and strategic acumen but also in his persistent pursuit of and openness to talented individuals. In an age of turmoil, he fully understood that no great enterprise could be accomplished by individual strength alone. As such, he consistently upheld *the principle of prioritizing the virtuous* and actively sought out talented individuals. By situating Liu Bei within the historical context of his time, Hu Zeng's poem further accentuates his heroic attributes. Liu Bei's difficult path in founding the Shu state was accompanied by Zhuge Liang's unwavering loyalty. In Zhou Tan's *The Former Lord of Shu* 《蜀先主》, the poem states: “豫州军败信途穷，徐庶推能荐卧龙。不是卑词三访谒，谁令玄德主巴邛。” (“Following the defeat in Yuzhou, when all paths seemed closed, Xu Shu recognized ability and recommended the Crouching Dragon. Had he not spoken humbly and made three visits, how could Xuande have come to govern Ba and Qiong?”)(Peng & Wang, 1960, 8357). During the formative period of his state-building, Liu Bei faced repeated setbacks, particularly in the early stages. It was under such pressure that his resolute character became increasingly apparent. Despite numerous defeats, Liu Bei never abandoned his ideals. The phrase “卑词三访谒” (“speaking humbly and visiting three times”) reflects not only his deep respect for Zhuge Liang but also his humility and perseverance in adversity. This effort laid a vital foundation for the eventual establishment of the Shu Han state. Consequently, even in the face of a powerful Wei state, Shu Han succeeded in securing a position within the tripartite division of the realm. The lines “古庙积烟萝，威灵及物多。因知曹孟德，争奈此公何” (“The ancient temple is shrouded in smoke and overgrown with vines; its spiritual power continues to touch many. Thus it is known that even Cao Mengde could not overcome this man”)(Peng & Wang, 1960, 9396) depict Liu Bei's shrine as weathered by time yet still imbued with lasting reverence. Through this image, the poet conveys enduring respect for Liu Bei's legacy and implies his moral authority transcended even the formidable power of Cao Cao. The poet conveys deep reverence for Liu Bei's enlightened leadership and the spirit embodied by Shu Han, imbuing the poem with a sense of

transcendent moral force. Shu Han's ability to maintain independence in the face of the powerful Wei state testifies to Liu Bei's strategic wisdom and courage. This represents not only a literary reflection on history but also a poetic tribute to Liu Bei's heroic image.

Liu Bei, as a sage monarch characterized by loyalty and heroic spirit, also carries a distinctly tragic dimension, which lies primarily in the unfulfilled realization of his political aspirations, the collapse of his ideals, and the incompetence of his successor. Though guided by lofty ideals, he was repeatedly confronted by the harsh realities of his time and ultimately forced to grapple with the tension between moral vision and political responsibility. In Du Fu's *Paying Respects at the Temple of the Former Lord* 《谒先主庙》, the poet writes: “惨淡风云会，乘时各有人。力侔分社稷，志屈偃经纶。” (“Amid bleak winds and clouds, powers converged; in turbulent times, each had his moment. His strength rivaled those who divided the empire, yet his ambition was stilled and his plans for governance laid aside.”) (Peng & Wang, 1960, 2504). Liu Bei died before his efforts were complete, entrusting the future of Shu Han to Marquis Wu. Following the death of Marquis Wu, the Han legacy came to an end. The opening couplet — “惨淡风云会，乘时各有人” (“Amid bleak winds and clouds, powers converged; in turbulent times, each had his moment”) — evokes the volatility of history and its impersonal nature. The imagery of wind and cloud suggests national upheaval and the helplessness of individuals within it. The following lines — “力侔分社稷，志屈偃经纶” (“His strength rivaled those who divided the empire, yet his ambition was stilled and his plans for governance laid aside”) — express the disillusionment and collapse of heroic ideals under the pressure of political reality. Liu Bei sought to restore the Han dynasty, yet the historical record reveals a persistent gulf between political idealism and historical reality. This tragic framing elevates Liu Bei beyond the realm of historical narrative, transforming him into a literary symbol of the internal tension and aspirations of the Confucian scholar-official class. Although Liu Bei succeeded in dividing the realm and founding Shu Han, his successor failed to preserve the regime. The fall of Shu added further tragic weight to Liu Bei's already sorrowful historical ending.

In Liu Yuxi's *Temple of the Former Lord of Shu* 《蜀先主庙》, the opening expresses reverence for Liu Bei and a deep respect for history. In the second half of the poem, however, the lines “得相能开国，生儿不象贤。凄凉蜀故妓，来舞魏宫前” (“With a worthy minister, the state was founded; but his son resembled not the virtuous. The sorrowful courtesans of Shu now dance before the Wei court”) (Peng & Wang, 1960, 4016) reveal a sense of regret and disappointment directed at the successors of Shu Han. This contrast not only underscores the indifference to historical change but also evokes a lament for the unworthiness of heroic successors. The line “凄凉蜀故妓，来舞魏宫前” (“The sorrowful courtesans of Shu now dance before the Wei court”) carries a tone of melancholy, reflecting the helpless sorrow brought about by historical transition. The former splendor of Shu has faded into the past, and its courtly music and dance now survive only in the palaces of Wei, symbolizing the cultural displacement and historical loss following the fall of Shu Han.

In summary, Tang poets constructed a multifaceted and richly layered image of Liu Bei. He is portrayed both as a benevolent and virtuous ruler and as a heroic sovereign. Together with Zhuge Liang, he helped establish the enduring model of the sage monarch and virtuous minister in Chinese historical tradition. Yet, he is also cast as a tragic figure whose political enterprise ultimately remained incomplete. Accordingly, a structured table of key elements comprising Liu Bei’s image may be developed, as shown in Table 1, in order to offer a concise synthesis of his historical and cultural portrayal. A multidimensional reading of Liu Bei’s image not only contributes to a more nuanced comprehension of history but also provides contemporary perspectives on the tensions between loyalty, idealism, and political reality.

Table 1. Categorization of Liu Bei’s Image in Tang Poetry

Main Category	Subcategory	Representative Poetic Line
Moral Character 仁德品格	Benevolence and compassion for the people 宽厚爱民	“先主能收士” (<i>The Former Lord was able to win over men</i>) – Du Fu
	Respect for talent and humility 礼贤下士	“三顾频烦天下计” (<i>Thrice he paid humble visits, seeking counsel for the realm</i>) – Du Fu
Sovereign–Minister Relations 君臣关系	Intimacy between ruler and adviser 鱼水之翼	“鱼到南阳方得水” (<i>Only upon reaching Nanyang did the fish find water</i>) – Bai Juyi
Evaluation of Achievements 功业评价	Regret over unfulfilled ambitions 未竟之憾	“蜀主窥吴幸三峡” (<i>The Lord of Shu peered toward Wu, fortunate to reach the Three Gorges</i>) – Du Fu

2. The Dissemination of Liu Bei’s Image in Tang Poetry

The reception and reinterpretation of Liu Bei’s image are not limited to historical records but are also richly expressed in the lines and verses of Tang poetry. The reimagining of Liu Bei in Tang poetry frequently integrates personal emotion with collective historical memory. The dissemination of Liu Bei’s image in Tang poetry occurs across multiple dimensions—temporal, social, and discursive—thereby providing a broad stage and contextual foundation for its ongoing construction. At the same time, the construction of this image intersects closely with the political imperatives of the Tang dynasty in the aftermath of the An Shi Rebellion.

In the *Complete Tang Poems* 《全唐诗》 (Revised Edition and Chen Shangjun's *Supplement to the Complete Tang Poems* 《全唐诗补编》), there are a total of 43 poems depicting figures or sites such as “the Former Lord” (先主), “Xuande” (玄德), “the Lord of Shu” (蜀主), “Yong'an Palace” (永安宫), and “Baidi City” (白帝城), authored by 16 poets. Specifically, in terms of chronological distribution, two poems originate from the early Tang period, four from the High Tang, 28 from the Middle Tang, and nine from the late Tang. From the perspective of geographical dissemination, textual and biographical analysis of the poets reveals that the sites of poetic composition are predominantly concentrated in the cluster of historical relics in Shu (蜀), such as the Wuhou Shrine in Chengdu (成都武侯祠) and Baidi City (白帝城), along with the cultural zones of the two capitals (两京) and the literati networks of Jiangnan (江南). Among these, the relics in Shu account for the overwhelming majority. This distribution clearly reflects how, following the An Shi Rebellion and during a period of ongoing national unrest, the populace expressed strong aspirations for benevolent rulers like Liu Bei—those who governed with compassion and honored the virtuous. In particular, the enduring presence of sites associated with Liu Bei in the Shu region served as emotional and symbolic catalysts for these expressions of cultural memory.

In terms of poetic authorship, among the 16 poets referenced, few were native to Shu. The majority were poets who had traveled to or temporarily resided in the region. Taking Du Fu, Liu Yuxi, and Li Shangyin as representative figures, an overview of their native origins and poetic activities is provided in Table 2, offering a glimpse into this broader trend. As the data suggests, throughout their travels and unsettled sojourns, these poets often expressed a longing for a virtuous sovereign. In their imagination, Liu Bei symbolized an ideal ruler—one who recognized talent and provided opportunities for meaningful service, enabling individuals to achieve merit and avoid the hardships of marginalization.

Table 2. Poets' Places of Origin and Composition Statistics

Poet	Place of Origin	Place of Composition	Number of Poems
Du Fu 杜甫	Gong County, Henan 河南巩县	Kuizhou 夔州	7
Liu Yuxi 刘禹锡	Luoyang, Henan 河南洛阳	Langzhou 朗州	3
Li Shangyin 李商隐	Xingyang, Henan 河南荥阳	Chengdu 成都	2

From the perspective of dissemination channels, a categorized comparative study may be conducted, which facilitates a deeper understanding of Liu Bei's image as a sage monarch. As Zhang (1997) notes, “*The categorization of Tang poetry can be traced back to the Tang dynasty itself... comparative analyses of poems on shared subjects*” (45). The present study focuses on thematic poems in which Liu

Bei serves as the central subject. According to this approach, poems that praise or reflect upon Liu Bei are often categorized as historical and commemorative verse. In light of this, the image of Liu Bei will be further examined through the lens of literary dissemination typologies.

Cao Meng (2004) argues: “The primary modes of literary dissemination in premodern China included instructing disciples, traveling among various states, engaging in remonstrations and poetic exchange, chanting verse while journeying and composing poetry during itinerant wandering, pursuing transcendental roaming and reclusion, inscribing walls and stone tablets, as well as manuscript copying and printing. The poetic persona within literary works functioned as a supplementary element in the broader mechanisms of literary dissemination” (13). Building on this framework and drawing upon the typology proposed by Ke Changxun (Ke, 2012, 12), the present study classifies Tang poems depicting Liu Bei into four major types: reflective and dedicatory poems (书怀赠友诗), transcendental or object-themed verse (咏物游仙诗), historical and commemorative elegies (咏史怀人诗), and nostalgic poetic travelogues (怀古吟游诗). These categories are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Typology of Tang Poems Depicting Liu Bei

Dissemination Type	Selected Poets and Representative Works
Reflective and Dedicatory Poems (书怀赠友诗)	Li Bai, <i>Upon Reading the Biography of Zhuge Liang, the Marquis of Martial Valor, and Expressing Sentiments: A Dedication to the Brothers of Magistrate Cui Shufeng in Chang'an</i> 《读〈诸葛武侯传〉书怀赠长安崔少府叔封昆季》
Transcendental or Object-Themed Verse (咏物游仙诗)	Cen Shen, <i>Temple of the Former Lord and Marquis Wu</i> 《先主武侯庙》; Du Fu, <i>Paying Respects at the Temple of the Former Lord</i> 《谒先主庙》; Liu Yuxi, <i>Temple of the Former Lord</i> 《先主庙》; Guanxiu, <i>Passing by the Temple of the Former Lord</i> 《经先主庙》
Historical and Commemorative Elegies (咏史怀人诗)	Wang Zun, <i>Nanyang</i> 《南阳》; Hu Zeng, <i>Historical Poems: Nanyang</i> 《咏史诗·南阳》; Zhou Tan, <i>The Former Lord of Shu</i> 《蜀先主》; Xu Yin, <i>Shu</i> 《蜀》
Nostalgic Poetic Travelogues (怀古吟游诗)	Du Fu, <i>Five Poems on Historical Sites That Stir Reflection</i> (No. 4) 《咏怀古迹五首》 (其四)

In addition to the categories listed above, Li Shanfu's *Lament for the Former Lord on Behalf of Kongming* 《代孔明哭先主》 and *Another Lament for the Former Lord on Behalf of Kongming* 《又代孔明哭先主》 contribute to the dissemination of Liu Bei's image from an alternative perspective. The dissemination of Tang poetry thus provided a broad platform for the construction of Liu Bei's image. Through poetic circulation and dissemination, Liu Bei's image was continuously interpreted and reshaped across different cultural contexts. By presenting diverse perspectives on Liu Bei, Tang literati highlighted the multiplicity and complexity of historical understanding, rendering Liu Bei's image increasingly vivid within the process of cultural exchange. Whether portrayed as the embodiment of loyalty and heroism or as the vessel of tragic ideals, Liu Bei's poetic image emerged as a sustained subject of reinterpretation—serving as a lasting source of inspiration for later literary production.

In conclusion, Tang poetry served not only as a crucial vehicle for the dissemination of Liu Bei's image but also as a key medium through which that image was constructed and reimagined. An examination of the spatiotemporal dimensions of dissemination, the poet groups involved, and the channels through which Liu Bei's image circulated in Tang poetry enables a deeper understanding of the cultural significance and emotional resonance attached to this historical figure, as well as the historical context that contributed to the widespread dissemination of his sage monarch image following the An Shi Rebellion. This multidimensional reading of Liu Bei not only enriches historical understanding but also offers contemporary insights into the complex interplay between loyalty, idealism, and political reality.

3. The Cultural Significance of Liu Bei's Image as a Sage Monarch

As a sage monarch whose legacy was closely intertwined with that of Zhuge Liang, Liu Bei's image held substantial significance in his own time and has continued to acquire new layers of meaning in subsequent cultural contexts. In Tang poetry, numerous poets explored and depicted Liu Bei's image in depth, rendering it an increasingly vivid reflection of the ideals and moral values upheld by the literati. Liu Bei's image in Tang poetry not only reflected the ideals and moral values of the literati but was also widely inherited and further developed in subsequent cultural traditions. Through the analysis of these poetic works, a more nuanced understanding can be gained of Liu Bei's cultural significance as a sage monarch and the far-reaching impact of his image in Chinese historical memory.

Liu Bei's image as a sage monarch exerted considerable influence not only during the Tang dynasty but also in later historical periods. During the Song dynasty, poets engaged with Liu Bei's political career and historical legacy through various lenses—affirming his benevolence, reflecting critically on his strategic choices in turbulent times, and employing his image as a historical allegory to comment on contemporary Southern Song politics. Specifically, Liu Kezhuang laments in *One Hundred Miscellaneous Poems: Liu Bei* 《杂咏一百首·刘备》: “华容芦苇里，一炬可无遗。叹息刘玄德，平生见事迟” “In the Huarong reeds, a single torch

could have left no trace. A sigh for Liu Xuande—throughout his life, he was slow in judgement.” (Institute of Ancient Chinese Literature & Xu, 1998a, 66). This verse expresses both regret for Liu Bei’s strategic hesitation following the Battle of Red Cliffs and a subtle critique of the moral restraint that led to missed opportunities. Fan Zhongyan, in *Trimming the Silver Lamp: On Sharing a Topic with Ouyang Xiu* 《剔银灯·与欧阳公席上分题》, writes in a jocular tone: “昨夜因看蜀志，笑曹操孙权刘备。用尽机关，徒劳心力，只得三分天地” (“Last night I read the Records of Shu and laughed at Cao Cao, Sun Quan, and Liu Bei. Exhausting all their cunning, they toiled in vain and gained only a third of the realm”) (Institute of Ancient Chinese Literature & Xu, 1998b, 112). The poem satirizes the Three Kingdoms leaders’ elaborate schemes, suggesting that even their utmost efforts could not overcome the fragmentation of the empire—an implicit critique of political futility. Yong Yourong offers a subtle allegory in Mount Fule 《富乐山》: “当时四海一刘备，至此已堪悲失脚。出语翻为乐国想，是人止可偏方看” (“At that time, Liu Bei aimed to unify the realm; by now, his fall is a sorrowful sight. His lofty words turn to dreams of a joyous state — such a man can only be viewed from a limited perspective.”) (Institute of Ancient Chinese Literature & Xu, 1998c, 56). The poem references Liu Bei’s retreat to Mount Fule (present-day Mianyang, Sichuan), lamenting his unfulfilled ambition and implicitly critiquing the Southern Song court’s regional limitations. In this sense, Liu Bei’s image transcends the constraints of his historical context to become a lasting symbol within Chinese cultural tradition—one that continues to inspire successive generations in their pursuit of moral ideals and political aspirations.

The image of Liu Bei holds not only historical significance but also contemporary relevance. As an integral component of classical Chinese literature, Tang poetry provides a crucial pathway for understanding the construction and interpretation of Liu Bei’s image. Through close reading of specific Tang poems, Liu Bei’s character traits and the complexity of his historical circumstances can be examined in greater depth. In the ongoing pursuit of his ideals, Liu Bei demonstrated a profound understanding of human nature. His efforts to reconcile idealism with political reality embody values that remain urgently relevant in contemporary society. In modern society, cooperation and friendship continue to serve as essential forces in advancing both individual and collective progress. The loyalty and moral integrity reflected in Liu Bei’s image represent virtues that are widely admired in navigating the complexities of human relationships. Through the lens of Tang poetry, a more comprehensive understanding of Liu Bei’s multifaceted persona emerges, revealing the enduring cultural and ethical significance his image holds for contemporary society. Whether in the pursuit of ideals, the shouldering of responsibility, or the valuing of friendship, Liu Bei’s image continues to serve as a source of moral inspiration amid the uncertainties of modern social life.

Conclusions

Liu Bei, as the sage monarch of Shu, is portrayed in ways that intertwine his traditional historical image with poetic representations found in Tang poetry — particularly in relation to his benevolence, magnanimity, and commitment to national moral duty. In Tang poetry, Liu Bei's sage monarch image emerges as both a ruler of loyalty and righteousness and a heroic sovereign. Alongside Zhuge Liang, he embodies the historical ideal of the virtuous ruler-minister paradigm while simultaneously bearing the marks of a deeply tragic figure. The dissemination of Liu Bei's image through various poetic channels provides multiple interpretive perspectives for analyzing his cultural construction. This multidimensional reading of Liu Bei's image not only enriches historical understanding but also offers insight into the dynamic tensions between loyalty, idealism, and political reality. The study of Liu Bei's image as a sage monarch and its dissemination holds not only historical and cultural significance but also pressing relevance for contemporary ethical reflection.

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