Chinese Autobiographical Writing

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In the final decade of the Han, two key figures present themselves as highly capable military men.

Disordered times call for individuals willing to take action. When the Han fell into disorder after major rebellions broke out in 184, even many well-educated men rose to the challenge of leading armies. Good examples are Cao Cao and his son Cao Pi, both excellent poets but also skilled in the arts of war. Cao Cao and other officials assigned to suppress the rebels soon were competing among themselves for supremacy, their rivalry immortalized in the stories associated with the subsequent Three Kingdoms period (220–265). Cao Cao became the dominant figure in the north, but it was Cao Pi who, after his father’s death, finally arranged the abdication of the last Han emperor and established the Wei dynasty.

Cao Cao composed the first text below in 210, when he was fifty-six. By then, with the north firmly in his grip, he aspired to unify the entire empire. When his rivals attacked him at the court, claiming that he intended to depose the emperor, Cao Cao wrote this essay as a response. He asserted
that he had many opportunities to declare himself emperor but had never harbored such ambitions.

The piece by Cao Pi that follows was written a few years later and is the preface to his On the Standards for Literature (Dianlun), only parts of which survive. In the preface, Cao Pi mentions his love for poetry only in passing. He devotes his account instead to his martial arts training and how his skills surpassed those of almost everyone he had ever encountered. Even when writing about literature, it would seem, he wanted to be thought of as a brash military man, not given to false modesty.

Relinquishing My Fiefs and Clarifying My Basic Aims, by Cao Cao

I was quite young when I was nominated as Filial and Incorrupt. Since I was not a famous recluse, I feared that prominent people would regard me as a stupid nobody. Therefore, I hoped to become a commandery governor, build my reputation through able governing and reforming the people, and become known to the world that way. When I was the governor of Ji’nan [Shandong], I began with eliminating cruelty and corruption and implementing a fair recommendation system. I offended quite a few palace attendants-in-ordinary. Worried that my actions had enraged the powerful local families and would cause harm to my family, I resigned on the pretext of illness.

At that time, I was still very young. Among my peers recommended as Filial and Incorrupt the same year, some were already fifty, yet they were not regarded as old. So I thought to myself, “If I wait for twenty years until the empire is peaceful and just, I will be no older than these peers are today.” Therefore, I returned home with the intention to retire permanently. I built a fine study fifty li east of Qiao [Anhui, Cao Cao’s hometown]. My plan was to read books during the summer and fall and go hunting during the winter and spring. I just wanted to have a mediocre plot of land, retreat from the world, and cut off all human contact. However, my wish was not fulfilled.

I was appointed as a commandant-in-chief and promoted to take charge of Control Army, my assignment to capture traitors and make a name for myself. I hoped to be enfeoffed and made the general who conquers the west, so that later my grave would have a tomb inscription titled “The Tomb of Marquis Cao of Han, the Late General Who Conquers the West.” That was my ambition. When Dong Zhuo [132–192] rebelled, the call arose for a military
expedition. At that time, I could easily organize a large army; however, I did not want too many soldiers, so I actually often reduced the number of my troops. This is because a large military force often becomes overconfident, thinking itself invincible, ready to take on a strong enemy, bringing on a new disaster. Therefore, in the Battle of Xingyang [190, Henan], I deployed only a few thousand soldiers. Later, when I returned to Yangzhou [Jiangsu] to recruit soldiers, I took less than three thousand because I had always wanted to limit the size of my forces.

When I was the governor of Yanzhou [Shandong] and defeated the Yellow Turban Rebellion, three hundred thousand Yellow Turbans surrendered. Then Yuan Shu [d. 199] declared himself emperor in Jiujiang [Jiangxi] and those under him all presented themselves as his subjects. He named the city gate Jianhao [Founding Reign] Gate and selected garments appropriate for an emperor. His two wives competed with each other for the title of empress. After Yuan decided on his plan, his subordinates advised him to assume the throne immediately and proclaim his act to the world. Yuan Shu replied, “Since Cao Cao is still a threat, I cannot do it.” Later we captured four of his generals, after which his troops surrendered. Consequently, Yuan Shu became completely desperate, fell ill, and died. When his brother Yuan Shao [155–199] seized the region north of the Yellow River, he had a very powerful military force. In assessing my own strength, I knew very well that I could not compete with him. However, I figured that if I died for the country and for a just cause, then my name would be known throughout the ages. Fortunately, I defeated Yuan Shao and killed his two sons.

Then there was Liu Biao [142–208] who counted on his royal background. He harbored evil intent, made tentative moves, and waited for opportunities. After he occupied Dangzhou [Hubei and Hunan], I crushed him as well. By then I had pacified the realm. I was appointed the grand councillor, the most powerful position in the government. This already surpassed what I had aspired to. My words sound self-important, but the reason I recount these things is to forestall criticism; hence I do not hold anything back. If it had not been for me, who knows how many people would have proclaimed themselves emperors or kings.

Seeing that I am powerful and never believed the Mandate of Heaven, some people might privately comment that I harbor the intention of overthrowing the emperor. Such baseless conjectures disturb me to no end. The reason that both Lord Huan of Qi [d. 643 BCE] and Lord Wen of Jin [d. 628] are well-
known throughout history is that even though they both had vast military strength, they were still loyal to the Zhou and served the Zhou court. *The Analects* (Lunyu) says, “The Zhou controlled two-thirds of the empire, yet continued to serve the Yin. The virtue of the Zhou may be said to be the utmost of virtue.” This is because the Zhou, with its superior power, was willing to serve a weak king. In the past, when the Yan general Yue Yi [Warring States period] sought refuge in the state of Zhao, the king of Zhao wanted his help to conquer Yan. Yue Yi prostrated himself and declared that “I served the Yan king with the same sincerity as I serve you. If I committed a crime and was exiled to another state, I would never in my life do anything to hurt your people of Zhao, and not just because I am a descendant of Zhao!”

When the Qin emperor Huhai [230–207 BCE] was about to execute General Meng Tian [ca. 250–10 BCE], Meng said, “From my grandfather to his son and grandson, three generations of the Mengs were given commissions by the Qin court. I commanded more than three hundred thousand soldiers, making my military force strong enough to overthrow the emperor. Nevertheless, I know I have to protect the moral principle of the ruler-subject relationship, even if it means death. This is because I do not dare to dishonor my ancestors’ teachings and betray the late emperor.” Whenever I read about these two people, I break down in tears. My grandfather, father, and I were all high ministers of the Han emperors, fully trusted by them. If I count my son Cao Pi and his brothers, the trust has lasted more than three generations. This is not just what I say publicly; I say the same thing to my wife and concubines, ensuring that they understand my intentions as well. I tell them, “When I die, you all should remarry and make my intentions known to others.” These words of utmost importance are from the bottom of my heart.

The reason that I am expressing my innermost thoughts so earnestly is because I read the “Golden Coffer” [a chapter in *The Book of Documents* (Shang-shu)]. The chapter recounts how the Duke of Zhou placed his prayer for King Wu in a golden coffer, on the chance that if people came to doubt his loyalty, he could prove his innocence. It is unrealistic now for me to hand over my troops, resign from my office, and return to Wuping [Henan] as a duke. Why? Because I truly worry that destruction will descend if I give up my army. I need not only to consider how my children and grandchildren will fare but also to keep in mind that if I fall, the state will collapse. Therefore, I need to avoid seeking an empty name at the cost of putting us all in real danger.

The previous emperor made my three sons dukes, which I then resolutely
declined but now plan to accept. This is not because I want the glory but because these trappings provide security. Whenever I read about Jie Zitui [d. 636 BCE] declining the fief offered by Jin and Shen Baohu [fl. 506 BCE] avoiding the rewards granted by Chu, I put down the book and sigh. These stories made me think. Relying on the authority of the state, I led expeditions on behalf of the emperor. Though the weaker one, I defeated the stronger party, a case of the smaller army capturing the larger one. Once I took action, all my wishes came true, all my worries were set to rest. I pacified the realm and did not disgrace the emperor’s command, all thanks to Heaven’s showing favor for the Han, as human power alone could not possibly have achieved this. I was granted four counties with an income of taxes from thirty thousand households. What virtue did I have to deserve this!

Because the empire is still unstable, I cannot abandon my official position. However, my fiefs can be much reduced. I will relinquish the income from the Yangxia, Zhe, and Ku Counties [all in Henan], in total twenty thousand households. I will retain only the fief of Wuping County, with ten thousand households. I hope that this will quash baseless criticism of my actions.

source: Cao Cao 曹操, Cao Cao ji 曹操集 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1959), 2.41–43.

Preface to On the Standards for Literature, by Cao Pi

In the first year of the Chuping reign period [190], Dong Zhuo murdered Emperor Shao [r. 189], poisoned Empress Dowager He (d. 189), and undermined the royal house. At that time, the entire empire was exhausted by Emperor Ling’s rule and outraged by Dong Zhuo’s vicious actions. Families were concerned about impending chaos, and everyone felt in grave danger. Governors in the east called for everyone to act on the principle articulated in The Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiul): that everyone has the responsibility to fight against villains, which was asserted by the people of Wei when they went out on campaign against Zhouyu in Pu. The governors began to raise armies. Many magnates, noble warriors, rich families, and powerful clans responded to the call, arriving from near and far, and congregated there. The troops of Yanzhou [Shandong] and Yuzhou [Henan and Anhui] fought in Xingyang [Henan]. The army of Henei [Henan] fought in Mengjin [Henan]. Dong Zhou then moved the emperor to the western capital Xi’an. In the east,
the most powerful warlords annexed neighboring states, the lesser ones swallowed up cities, and weaker ones managed to amass lands. Everyone fought everyone else. Just then the Yellow Turban Rebellion erupted in the Haidai region [Shandong] and bandits rose in the mountains of Bing [Shanxi] and Ji [Hebei]. Following up a series of victories, the Yellow Turban forces shifted their target and moved to the south. Townsmen fled for safety at the sight of signal alarms; urban dwellers took flight on seeing the approaching rebels. People were slaughtered; their exposed bones were everywhere. At that time, I was five years old.

As the world was in such turmoil, my father decided I should learn archery. By the age of six, I had mastered the skill. Then he taught me to ride a horse. By the age of eight, I was very good at shooting from horseback. With military conflicts so frequent, I often joined my father on military campaigns. At the beginning of the Jian’an reign period [196], my father led a southern expedition to Jingzhou [Hubei]. When he reached Wan [Henan], Zhang Xiu surrendered. Then ten days later, he turned around and rebelled. My brother the Filial and Incorrupt Cao Ang (courtesy name Zixiu) and my cousin Cao Anmin were killed, but I managed to escape on horseback. At the time, I was ten years old.

Clearly, the usefulness of the civil versus military arts depends on the time in which one lives. I was born during the disastrous Zhongping era and grew up amid war. Therefore, from a very young age, I loved the bow and horses, and my passion has persisted to this day. I can still chase an animal for ten li and often practice shooting from horseback with a target a hundred feet away. My body grew stronger day after day, and I never tired of practice.

In the tenth year of the Jian’an reign period [205], Jizhou [Hebei] was finally pacified. The [ancient Korean] Wo and Mo peoples offered fine bows as tribute; the Yan and Dai regions [Hebei] presented famous horses. In the late spring of that year, the tree god Goumang was presiding over the season, so gentle breezes caressed the plants. The bow was warm, the hand deft, the grass short, the animals fat. My cousin Cao Zidan and I went hunting in Ye [Hebei] the whole day. We captured nine river deer and thirty pheasants and rabbits. Later, when the troops marched south and bivouacked at Quli [Henan], director of the imperial secretariat Xun Yu [163–212] came to present the troops food and goods on behalf of the emperor. We met, and at the end of our conversation, Xun Yu said, “I heard you are good at shooting arrows from both the left and right sides, which is so difficult.” I replied, “Your
honor has not seen how I can shoot down the targets on horseback from any position and angle." When Xun Yu, pleased, said, "Great!" I added, "Shooting targets in a practice range is not that impressive even if your score is perfect. What is really impressive is when you ride a horse on the plain covered in luxuriant grass and chase fleeing animals and birds in flight, each arrow hitting the moving target perfectly." At that time the military adviser Zhang Jing was present. He looked at Xun Yu and clapped: "Marvelous!"

I also studied sword-fighting with many masters. There are many different schools, but the best teachers are from Luoyang. During Emperors Huan and Ling's reigns [147–188], the warrior Wang Yue, an expert of the Luoyang school, was well-known around the capital. Shi A of Henan was said to have studied under him and learned the basics of Wang's methods. I studied with Shi A and became quite proficient.

One time, I drank with a group including Liu Xun, the pacifying barbarians general, and Deng Zhan, the courage and bravery general. I had long heard that Deng Zhan excelled at capturing adversaries through hand-to-hand combat and was skilled at all types of weapons. He was said to be able to fight an armed enemy with his bare hands. I discussed sword-fighting with Deng Zhan for a long time. I told him that his sword-fighting technique was not the best and that I had been interested in this sport for a long time and had become quite good at it. Deng Zhan begged to fight me. At that time, we were all quite drunk and were just about to eat sugarcane, so we used sugarcanes as swords and fought several rounds. I hit his arm three times. People around us burst out laughing. Unhappy, Deng Zhan begged for another round. I said, "Since I depend on speed, it is very hard for me to hit your face, so I only hit your arms." Deng Zhan again asked for one more round. I realized that he planned on suddenly hitting me in the front, so I pretended to move forward and attack. Sure enough, Deng Zhan came toward me, so I stepped back and struck him in the middle of his forehead. Everyone was amazed. I returned to my seat and said laughingly, "In the past, when Chunyu Yi [205–150 BCE] went to study with the famous doctor Gongsheng Yangqing [Han dynasty], Gongsheng forced Chunyu to abandon his old medical prescriptions. Only then did he teach Chunyu his secret methods. Now I also hope you, General Deng, will abandon your old techniques and adopt the real sword-fighting method." Everyone was excited.

An important thing to remember is not to regard yourself as the best. When I was young, I was skilled at double-halberd fighting and thought no
one could beat me. People call such fighting “sitting in an iron room” and a decorated shield a “closed wooden cabin.” Later, I studied with Yuan Min of the Chen region. He excelled at fighting double halberds with a single halberd. It was truly amazing; his opponents had no idea which direction the halberd would appear from. Had I met Yuan Min in a narrow road, we might have had a hell of a fight.

I rarely played games other than Shooting Go, which I mastered to some degree. I wrote a rhapsody about it when I was young. At the time, the masters of Shooting Go were the duke of Hexiang, Ma Lang; Dongfang Anshi; and Zhang Gongzi. I still regret that I did not get a chance to play against any of them.

My father loved poetry and books and always had a book in his hand, even during military campaigns. When I called on him or waited on him at leisure, he would often tell me, “If you love learning at a young age, you can really concentrate. Adults don’t have as good memories. Yuan Yi [courtesy name Boye] and I are the only adults who are capable of studying diligently.” Therefore, when I was young, I recited The Classic of Poetry (Shijing) and The Analects, and when I grew up I studied the five classics and read widely in other kinds of books, including The Historical Records (Shiji), The History of the Han (Hanshu), and the writings of all the philosophical schools, devouring them all. I composed sixty essays and poems. Whether I can be described as smart without showing off, brave but willing to retreat, kind to others, and fair to subordinates, I will leave to the judgment of the good historians of the future.

source: Xia Chuancai 夏傳才, Cao Pi ji jiaozhu 唐丕集校註 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2013), 247.

Further Reading