

Commentary on Cao Cao's Yuefu Poetry Thought

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Abstract: Cao Cao, a prominent military strategist and politician during the late Han and Three Kingdoms periods, rose to prominence in the northern region amidst intense competition, achieving significant success. Additionally, he was recognized for his literary prowess, embodying the spirit of Han Yuefu poetry in his works. Through his writings, Cao Cao depicted contemporary social issues with passionate and tragic emotions using simple language and vivid expression techniques. His most notable artistic achievement is Yuefu poetry, which set a new literary trend. While historical evaluations of Cao Cao often focus on his political and military endeavors, this article approaches his legacy from a literary perspective, analyzing his Yuefu poetry through the lens of literary thought and historical research methods to uncover the ideological implications, contributions to literary development, and influence on modern society.

1. Introduction

Cao Cao (155-220 AD), also known as Mengde, was a distinguished politician, military strategist, and literary figure of the Jian'an period. Born in Qiao, Pei State (now Hao County, Anhui Province), Cao Cao is credited with over twenty Yuefu poems. Building upon the traditions of ancient Yuefu poetry, his works showcase innovation and novel ideas in the poetic realm.

In terms of ideology, a prominent feature of Cao Cao's Yuefu poetry lies in his adept use of epic techniques to authentically document and reflect the societal upheaval during the waning years of the Han Dynasty. His poems vividly portray the tragic realities of social disorder, the power struggles among warlords, and the tumultuous experiences of the populace in the late Eastern Han Dynasty. Artistically, Cao Cao's poetry exhibits a remarkable level of artistry. His lofty spirit, grand demeanor, and emotive expressions create a distinctive style that captivates readers, immersing them in his verses. Drawing from the rich traditions of the Book of Songs, Chu Ci, and Han Yuefu, Cao Cao employs the contemporary social milieu as his thematic backdrop, employing simple yet evocative language and vivid expression techniques to convey passionate and tragic sentiments. His influence extended beyond the works of the Seven Scholars of Jian'an, indirectly shaping the Tang New Yuefu movement and significantly contributing to the evolution of five-character poetry.

2. The ideological implications of Cao Cao's Yuefu poetry

2.1 Yuefu complex & authentic record of social reality

During the late Eastern Han Dynasty, a period marked by warlord chaos, social unrest, and

economic struggles, Cao Cao emerged as a notable figure. He embraced the notion of mental liberation and the importance of individual worth in the midst of societal changes. With a belief in taking responsibility for shaping a peaceful and prosperous era, Cao Cao's Yuefu poetry serves as a reflection of his ideals. His poetic works delved into contemporary events, political issues, and human emotions, portraying the hardships and struggles faced by people during the turbulent times of the Han Dynasty's decline. Characterized by a somber tone and profound emotions, Gan De praised Cao Cao's poetry for its portrayal of "showing dominance at times," where it expressed the magnanimity of a generation of heroes^[1]. In the epic narrative of the end of the Han Dynasty, Cao Cao's poetic legacy encapsulates his commanding presence, broad-mindedness, and lofty aspirations, illustrating his heroic qualities.

2.2 The idea of saving the country and the people, and striving tirelessly

Amidst a nation gripped by crisis and its people enduring immense suffering, he directed his noble ambition towards the salvation of his countrymen through military strategies. Embarking on a challenging 30-year military campaign, his determination and resilience were mirrored in his poetic compositions. The poem "Journey to the Cold" stands out as a prime example, offering a poignant reflection of Cao Cao's inner thoughts and providing insight into his perspectives on life and the world^[2].

The notions of achievement and heroic consciousness have held a significant place in literary circles, influencing Jian'an literati to pursue specific thoughts and emotions they wish to explore and convey. As a prominent leader of his era, Cao Cao's poetry strongly expresses the spirit of tenacious struggle for the great cause of unification. His verses capture the deep-rooted calamities experienced by the populace during the war, unveiling their worries for the nation, compassion for the people, and yearning for order, thus articulating their resolute quest for national unity.

2.3 The idea of being proactive and striving for excellence, with a deeper aspiration than a longer one

Cao Cao fought fiercely with his horses to forge a harmonious society with national cohesion, prosperity, transparent governance, modesty, and respect. His poetry eloquently mirrors this aspiration for a brighter tomorrow and a proactive ethos. The Short Song Journey is a representative of his idea. Although it reveals the regret of a short life and unfulfilled ambitions, he was not defeated by this. "What if the mountain is high, Or how deep the sea? When the Duke of Zhou greeted a guest, in his service all wished to be."

Despite enduring life's trials, his unwavering ambitions and indomitable spirit remain steadfast. It is these emotions and traits that imbue the Jian'an literary realm with a fervent and grandiose writing style^[3]. He believes that the people are important and need to be managed by a wise ruler, as well as social systems and legal constraints. He envisions to appoint wise and capable people like ancient wise rulers, to make the people's lives prosperous, and to ensure the stability and unity of the country. This is not only an enlightened political system, but also a longing for a better life. It is also the guiding ideology for Cao Cao's governance of chaos and the prosperity of the country, and the life ideal he strives for.

3. Achievements of Cao Cao's Yuefu Poems

Cao Cao's literary accomplishments are primarily showcased in his Yuefu poems. His verses, characterized by solemnity and freshness, exude a majestic grandeur. He "borrowed the melodies of ancient music to chronicle contemporary events" (Source of Ancient Poetry). In doing so, he touched

on the hardships of the people. This endeavor deserves recognition in literary history for its depth and impact^[4].

Xiao Difei noted that while Cao Cao's primary roles were as a politician and military strategist rather than a professional poet, his deep passion for literature and skill in music allowed him to convey his aspirations, sentiments, and emotions through his Yuefu poems. Despite the presence of many poets since the Eastern Han Dynasty, Cao Cao's dedication and the depth of his literary works position him as a leading figure in the realm of poetry.

3.1 Expand the narrative scope and write new ideas with old titles

Yuefu poetry predominantly explores themes of lower-class society, including family tragedies and suffering, to shed light on social contradictions. While Cao Cao also embraced these themes, his unique social background and artistic refinement allowed him to offer a fresh perspective on the world, capturing a vast historical panorama. Historians noted: The imperial army has been in power for over thirty years, and when climbing high, one must compose poems and create new poetry, which are all turned into movements by the orchestra. "This is indeed a true record^[5]. Despite using traditional titles from Han Yuefu poetry, Cao Cao's compositions diverged from ancient lyrical meaning. Instead, they inherit the spirit of Yuefu folk songs of "arising from events", "using Yuefu titles to compose poetry", reflecting new realities and presenting a new appearance.

3.2 Integrating emotions into things, expressing emotions through scenery, blending emotions and scenery

While Yuefu poetry is mainly narrative, Cao Cao's Yuefu poetry uniquely intertwines emotions with events, articulating sentiments through vivid depictions of scenery and merging emotional depths with the backdrop of settings. Certain scholars have observed that: In terms of narrative capacity, Cao indeed expanded the narrative space, transitioning from mere depictions of individual occurrences in Yuefu poetry to exploring broader historical themes that resonate with the shared experiences of humanity; he moved from partial detail description to historical overall description, as well as occasional individual events to narratives with universal cognitive significance.

3.3 Personal thoughts and spiritual expression

Cao Cao's Yuefu poems provide a candid glimpse into his true character, directly showcasing his expansive vision. While the language employed mirrors that of the Han Dynasty's Yuefu poetry, Cao Cao's works possess a distinct and individualistic style. His poetry also expresses his inner spirit. "The Short Song Journey", for instance, is the "Request for Talent" in Cao Cao's Yuefu poetry^[6]. It embodies his political aspirations of global unification and his proactive nature.

4. Contribution to literary thought

Thanks to Cao Cao, there was a significant shift in literary focus from poetry to prose, marking the initial literary zenith in Chinese history and cementing poetry's supremacy in ancient Chinese literature. The book "Wenxin Diaolong" encompasses fifty chapters, with sections such as "Yuefu", "Lun Shuo", "Zhao Ce", "Huan Yi", "Zhang Biao", "Zhang Ju", "Shi Lei", "Yang Qi", "Shi Tong" delving into various aspects related to Cao Cao's poetic style, family background, and literary ideologies. Here are segments that highlight Cao Cao's ideological stances (Table 1).

Table 1: Evaluation of Cao Cao's Thought in Various Works

Related content	Article Sources	Ideological Reflections
Emperor Wu of Wei (posthumously honored by Cao Cao) issued a decree stating that one should not violate it; Xiaozhi is ready.	Article 19 of the Imperial Edict	Based on fact
During the Western Jin Dynasty, the imperial decrees were meticulously documented, and the three edicts were strictly enforced following the tradition established in the closing years of the Han Dynasty. These edicts were structured into three distinct sections. Duke Cao (honorific title of Cao Cao) is known for not having to compromise three times and not being flashy. Consequently, during the early Wei Dynasty era, it was emphasized that simply establishing facts and pursuing aesthetic appeal were insufficient.	Chapter 22 of the Table of Chapters	Based on facts and sources
In the past, Emperor Wu of Wei (posthumously honored by Cao Cao) criticized the accumulation of rhyme in his essays and was skilled at using it as a substitute. Lu Yun is also a proponent of "four words in a sentence; four sentences at best". Observe the rhyme system, and find what resonates the most. Excessive variation in rhyme could lead to a jarring effect on the ears, whereas a consistent rhyme scheme over a prolonged period could fatigue the audience. Although brilliant talents are inspiring and can stimulate clear and virtuous thoughts, it is better to adopt a moderate approach to ensure that no mistakes are made.	Chapter 34 of "Chapter Sentences"	Innovation and transformation
The poet also incorporated the character "xi" (a common mood particle in the Southern poetry genre of "Chu Ci" during the Warring States period, akin to the modern "ah") within the sentence structure, contrasting with "Chu Ci" where it was used outside the sentence. Utilizing the word 'xi' to extend the sentence is a linguistic technique to enhance the remaining narrative. Although Shun's poem 'The Southern Wind' has been well-regarded over time, Emperor Wu of Wei (also known as Cao Cao) held such a strong affinity for it that its literary significance was diminished!		
Therefore, Emperor Wu of Wei (Cao Cao) considered the writings of Mr. Zhang (also known as Zhang Fan, who was born into a prestigious family and served as Cao Cao's councilor) to be of poor quality, and his knowledge was superficial and not extensive. He specialized in picking up small essays by Cui (proficient in exegesis) and Du (with a strong sense of rationality in his works), and his works were difficult to understand and difficult to comprehend. This issue can also be seen as a rare flaw.	Chapter 38 of 'Matters'	Internal talent and external learning
Just as Zhong Ren (Wang Chong's character) used an inkstone to summarize, Shu Tong specialized with his pen, organizing both chronologically and thematically. The Duke of Cao (the honorific title of Cao Cao) feared the harm of writing, and Lu Yuntan used his thoughts to labor his spirit, which is no empty talk.	Chapter 42 of 'Nourishing Qi'	Love talent and cherish people

4.1 The founder and promoter of Jian'an literature

In the year 196 AD, under the guidance of Emperor Xian of Han, Cao Cao relocated the capital to Xuchang and renamed it "Jian'an." He leveraged the emperor's authority to command the feudal lords in an effort to rebuild the great cause of unification. Concurrently, he recruited talented individuals to establish a literary center in the north. The literary works produced during the Jian'an period, including those from subsequent years, are commonly referred to as "Jian'an literature." Jian'an literature not only continued the trajectory of literary development from the middle and late Eastern Han Dynasty but also marked a significant turning point in its gradual evolution under specific conditions, making it a period of special significance in the history of Chinese literature^[7].

4.2 The inheritor, developer, and reformer of Yuefu poetry

Cao Cao inherited the five-character poetry form that emerged from Han Yuefu folk songs, using Yuefu poetry titles and following common themes found in these folk songs. Within development and transformation, he changed the literati's attitude towards Yuefu poetry, broke through the rigid structure of Han Yuefu lyrics and songs, and diversified the content by expanding the themes and expressive scope of poetry. He also broadened the narrative space and increased the degree of lyricism. By linking personal experiences, emotions, and unique aesthetic preferences, he expressed feelings with simple language. Additionally, Cao Cao transformed the Five-Character Yuefu, pioneering a grand and tragic style of five-character poetry, which greatly influenced the emergence of similar poetry in later generations.

4.3 Love talents, cherish people, protect talents, and educate people

Pei Songzhi cited the biography of Chen Lin in "Dian Lue" and discussed Chen Lin's writing after surrendering to Cao Cao, as well as Cao Cao's evaluation of him. He said, "Lin wrote various books and submitted them to Emperor Taizu (posthumously known as Cao Cao) after completion. Emperor Taizu suffered a great deal initially. One day, he felt ill and laid down to read Lin's works. Suddenly, he said, 'This heals my illness.' He generously bestowed upon Lin. '" Similarly, Liu Xie wrote in his book "The Book of Changes," saying, "I dare to point to the forefront of Duke Cao, and I am fortunate to have avoided the slaughter of Yuan Shao's party"^[8].

This reflects that Cao Cao not only loved and cherished talents in literature, but also protected and nurtured them. The development of Jian'an literature is closely related to Cao Cao's ideology.

In short, he promoted the development of Jian'an literature. The poetry of the Jian'an literati not only absorbed influences from Yuefu folk songs but also began to evolve into a more refined and elegant literary style. This marks an important start in the history of classical Chinese poetry's development. From this point on, Yuefu poetry embarked on a new development path.

4.4 Influence and Integration with Modern Times

"Speak of Cao Cao, and here comes Cao Cao." Over the years, there have been thousands of "Cao Cao" amid thousands of people. The book "Records of the Three Kingdoms" chronicles his deeds, while the Northern Song Dynasty tells the history and stories of the Three Kingdoms. From the Yuan and Ming dynasties onward, "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" emerged, and by the late Qing dynasty, Three Kingdoms drama became popular. With the development of printing and theater, novels and dramas have become primary sources of historical knowledge for most people regarding our country's history. Over time, literati and artists have gradually shaped the image of Cao Cao on the modern stage, giving the name Cao Cao a specific meaning in popular language. "Qun Ying Hui,"

"Chang Ban Po," "Cai Wenji," and "Capturing and Releasing Cao" are among the many traditional dramas and their iconic characters that allow us to engage with feudal history through stories and imagery on stage. In addition to books, historical lectures, novels, and dramas, modern forms such as songs, audiobooks, storytelling, and mobile games also play a positive role in making ancient culture relevant for contemporary use.

As mentioned in the "Collected Essays on Cao Cao" edited by Guo Moruo and Jian Bozan:

Cao Cao was himself an outstanding poet who discarded the ornate and superficial literary style that had been prevalent since the Eastern Han dynasty, which often involved praising emperors and their palaces. Instead, he adopted the form of ancient and contemporary folk songs to reflect social realities, sympathize with people's suffering, express personal sentiments, and create powerful and emotional poetry. On the stable societal foundation and economic recovery in the Central Plains at the time, this led to the peak of Jian'an literature in Chinese history. It should be acknowledged that Cao Cao, as both a political leader and a poet, exerted significant influence. From these perspectives, Cao Cao played a progressive role in his era's history and is undeniably a remarkable figure in ancient Chinese history^[9].

5. Conclusion

Cao Cao was an outstanding literary figure and pioneer of Jian'an literature, known for his external focus on martial arts and internal promotion of literature. He created a new literary trend with his creative works, and his literary ideas greatly promoted the development of Chinese poetry, which also had an important influence on future literature.

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