CHAPTER ELEVEN

ANOTHER LIFE: HISTORY, ANECDOTE AND FICTION

Pei Songzhi, Fan Ye and Shishuo xinyu
Story-tellers, poets, playwrights and Pinghua
Revisionist history, Romance and the Peking opera
Marxist debate and the modern actor
Why Cao Cao?

For most men and women, little remains after death but the memory and record of their deeds and their work: facts may be discussed, but the book is largely closed.

For Cao Cao, however, the conflicts and controversy of life were followed by centuries of debate and reinvention. The complexity of his personal character and the imperfect nature of his achievement meant that he and his career became symbols for the future, and judgement over the years has been greatly affected by political circumstance and popular opinion. It is naturally not possible here to present a detailed account of this afterlife—there is already a vast literature in Chinese and other languages on all aspects of historical writing and fiction relating to the period of the Three Kingdoms—but the essay which follows offers a summary of Cao Cao’s changing reputation in the eighteen hundred years since his time.

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Predictably and as we have seen, stories gathered about Cao Cao even in his lifetime, some in his favour but many composed and circulated by rivals and enemies. Two major sources are Yuan Shao’s Call to Arms on the eve of the Guandu campaign in 200 and the Cao Man zhuann composed in the state of Wu.¹

¹ On the Call to Arms, see Chapter Three at 128 ff. On Cao Man zhuann, see note 27 to Chapter One; and on its negative eulogy of Cao Cao, Chapter Ten at 448.
Apart from criticism of Cao Cao’s family background, and general accusations of cruelty and usurpation of power, Yuan Shao charged him with the killing of Bian Rang and Zhao Yan, and the torture of Yang Biao, claiming also that he robbed the tombs of the dead and established officers to supervise the plunder. *Cao Man zhuan* told of jealousy and deception, with no concern for others, combined with a false bonhomie, a misleading simplicity of carriage and dress, and an underlying viciousness. Both sources affected to despise Cao Cao’s military ability—Yuan Shao would suffer for the underestimate—but the essential pattern was that of a man who was clever but treacherous, never to be trusted by friend or foe.

Such hostile propaganda would be circulated against any notable political figure, and varying forms of abuse and denigration were exchanged between all contenders in such a civil conflict; echoes may be found in texts surviving from the time of the restoration of Han under Emperor Guangwu in the early second century. Naturally enough, few tales directed against the eventual victor of a civil war were likely to survive, but the fact that Cao Cao’s state of Wei failed to unify the empire meant unfavourable stories were not suppressed, but rather spread by its enemies, while politics and historiography combined to produce debate on the nature of the dynasty and the founder of its fortunes. As Wei and then Shu-Han were taken over by the Sima family of Jin, the question of legitimacy became important, and the argument would continue for centuries.

Chen Shou (233–297), author of the now canonical *Sanguo zhi*, was born a subject of Shu-Han and worked in the records office of that state. He was in his early thirties when Shu-Han was conquered by Jin, and he took service again under the government of his new masters. It is said that he was favoured by the great minister Zhang Hua, and that after the conquest of Wu in 280 he drew upon the archives of the three rival governments to compile their history. There were other works available at the time, though in the absence of printing

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2 Bielenstein, *RHD* II, 232–248, discusses various forms of propaganda during that time of civil war. Much was made of omens and portentous sayings, but there were also songs and ditties which denigrated various contenders.

3 There are biographies of Chen Shou in *HYGZ* 11:189–190 and in *JS* 82:2137–38, the first being more favourable. Both accounts are presented at the end of the modern Beijing edition of *SGZ*, at 1475–76 [*HYGZ*] and 1477–78 [*JS*].