



The Evolving Representation of the Three Kingdoms Period and Its Leading Figures in Chinese History, Literature, and Popular Culture

——Tracing Cao Cao's Influence from Historical Record to Contemporary Media

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Abstract. This paper examines the evolution of the images of key figures from the Three Kingdoms period across different historical documents, classical literature, and modern popular culture. Drawing upon historical texts such as the record *San Guo Zhi* 三国志 and folk novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 三国演义, as well as numerous modern media resources including video games and online platforms, this study elucidates how these figures have been continuously reinterpreted to reflect the political, ideological, and cultural demands of different historical periods. Taking Cao Cao as an example, this article aims to clarify how the image of these famous historical figures has been reinterpreted over time. This is not only reflected in the tension and conflict between historical facts and literary creation, but also in the modern open interpretation method and the ability of contemporary readers to creatively interpret the image of Cao Cao. Research shows that the Three Kingdoms period still has a certain popular influence on modern society. Many outstanding figures during this period, especially Cao Cao, are still vivid and symbolic figures, becoming people's carriers to discuss many issues such as power, legitimacy and morality.

Keywords: Popular Culture, Historical Memories, History Impact.

1 Introduction

The Three Kingdoms period at the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty was one of the most important and famous periods in Chinese history. Many outstanding figures of this period are still active in literature, popular culture and digital media in modern society. Among them, Cao Cao is one of the most famous and controversial figures. Nearly two thousand years after his death, his image is still widely spread and penetrates into various fields, including modern society. Whether it is literature, TV series, movies, or a new generation of video games and online discussions (including online memes), Cao Cao is everywhere. Cao Cao's enduring influence in contemporary cul-

ture has raised a question: why can this historical figure at the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty still resonate in modern popular culture? The answer lies not in his single and fixed historical identity, but in the amazing adaptability and evolving influence of Cao Cao's image over time.

From a historical perspective, Cao Cao was a complex politician. Cao Cao's character was deeply influenced by the collapse and transformation of imperial authority at that time, and his behavior was driven by pragmatism, military needs and the need to maintain the survival of the ruling system. However, for centuries, the image of Cao Cao has been constantly reshaped and reinterpreted through moral history, literary narrative and ideological projection. From the portrayal of his villain in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* to the more detailed and even compassionate description in modern media, Cao Cao is not so much a fixed historical figure as a dynamic cultural symbol. His image is used to express a series of appeals about power, ambition, morality, leadership and realism.

This article explores why Cao Cao's image continues to resonate in various fields of modern society, and analyses the interaction between its real existence, the construction of his image in literary tradition, and contemporary reinterpretation. By re-examining the image of Cao Cao, especially the role of modern historiography in historical construction, this article examines the transformation of Cao Cao's image from the original historical reconstruction to modern cultural characteristics and argues that its lasting influence comes from the openness of its symbolic meaning and the repeated social and political anxiety at different levels of modern society. Correlation. Cao Cao is not only an outstanding historical figure, but also a mirror that reflects the understanding of power and legitimacy in different eras.

2 Evaluation

Cao Cao occupies an extremely complex position in Chinese history. Although he is often portrayed as a cunning and treacherous villain in later literary works and popular culture, from a historical perspective, he is a complex individual who was deeply affected by the political collapse at the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty. Understanding Cao Cao's identity as a historical figure is crucial to analyzing his political activities and literary creations. His identity as a warlord, politician and poet is inseparable from the era of institutional collapse, continuous war and deep social suffering. As mentioned by Rafe de Crespigny in his book *Imperial Warlord: A biography of Cao Cao 155-220 AD*, understanding Cao Cao requires placing him within the specific political context of the late Eastern Han Dynasty. The author does not view Cao Cao as a morally corrupt outcast or a usurper, but rather as an imperial warlord, a military and political ruler who continued to exercise power within the imperial framework after the collapse of the imperial system [1].

At the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, the imperial power gradually disintegrated, the central government lost effective control over the localities, local warlords rose, and the emperor was often reduced to a symbolic figure and lost the actual right to rule. It was against the background of this political division that Cao Cao rose. Instead

of publicly announcing his succession to the throne, he adopted the strategy of “holding the emperor hostage in order to command the world” 挟天子以令诸侯. From a historical perspective, this choice reflects political pragmatism, not mere ambition. By maintaining the nominal legitimacy of the Han Dynasty, Cao Cao not only gained legal authority, but also exercised real power behind the scenes. Even in the context of the collapse of the system, what he did also showed his deep understanding of the political symbolism and the continuity of the system [2].

Cao Cao's importance in history is also reflected in his outstanding military talent. His tactical abilities, especially demonstrated in the Battle of Guandu 官渡之战, played a crucial role in ultimately defeating a numerically superior enemy through strategic foresight and decisive leadership. Within this battle, he unified the northern regions of China. Beyond the battlefield, his influence on governance and civilization was equally profound. Cao Cao's administrative reforms aimed to stabilize society after the war, with the Tuntian 屯田 system, military agricultural colonies, being the most prominent example. This system organized agricultural production, ensuring food supplies for both civilians and the army [3]. Similarly, unlike the traditional selection method, he is more inclined to cultivate talents based on ability rather than origin. This is a pragmatic measure to deal with the war situation, although it challenges the deep-rooted social hierarchy in ancient China. These measures alleviated famine and enhanced national strength, reflecting Cao Cao's concept of long-term stability rather than short-term conquest [4].

Cao Cao's deep understanding of history made him quite different from many people of his time. He was keenly aware of the turmoil of the times and the fragility of power. This understanding not only shapes his political strategy but also permeates his understanding of the world. In Cao Cao's view, history is a cruel and direct force shaped by war, exile and death, not moral or philosophical construction. This sense of history makes him understand leadership as survival and result-oriented rather than idealism.

Re-examining Cao Cao's historical image, we find that he is neither a simple villain nor a hero. He is a product of the collapse of the social structure, dealing with chaos with pragmatic political means, administrative reform and military discipline. His methods are often harsh, but they have also helped to rebuild order in one of the most turbulent periods in Chinese history. Recognizing the historical complexity of Cao Cao helps us to interpret him more carefully and regard him as a pragmatist who acts under the limitations of the times, rather than a moral alien.

This understanding of history laid a crucial foundation for the study of Cao Cao's literary works. Just as his political career deeply reflects suffering, ambition and death, so does his poetry. It can be said that only by placing Cao Cao in his historical background can we truly understand his political heritage and literary expression.

Although Cao Cao's political career took place against the background of the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, his identity was far more than a military powerhouse or an administrative reformer. The historical pressure that shaped his political decision-making also affected his literary creation. Unlike the scholars and poets written in a relatively stable institutional environment in later generations, Cao Cao's poetry was deeply influenced by war, displaced people and his own survival difficulties. His

poetry did not avoid history but faced history head-on. This conflict is reflected in recurring themes such as impermanence, ambition, death and the fragility of power. These themes are not abstract thinking, but a true reflection of his personal experience. In this sense, Cao Cao's literary creation is not detached from his political career, but an extension of his historical consciousness. In Cao Cao's poetry, the image of "emperor and general" is transformed into a poetic language, expressing the various emotions and philosophical reflections of a time of crisis. Therefore, to understand why Cao Cao's image still influence in modern society, it is necessary not only to examine this historical ruler but also to examine the literary image he created through his works.

Based on the two contemporary academic studies on Cao Cao's literature, the research methods mainly include two types: one is to conduct historical research by placing him in the context of the political collapse at the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty; the other is to emphasize his role as the founding figure of the Jian'an 建安 literature. As pointed by Xu Gongchi 徐公持 in *Wei Jin wenxue shi* 魏晋文学史 [5], his literary works are rooted in the history background of the last Eastern Han Dynasty. His poems should be understood as the transformation of his real political experiences in the literary realm, rather than being purely aesthetic achievements completely disconnected from reality.

In *Han Wei Liuchao wenxue yu wenxian lungao* 汉魏六朝文学与文献论稿, Fu Gang 傅刚 pointed out that Cao Cao's growth and activity environment had very distinct characteristics. The decline of imperial power, factional struggles between eunuchs and imperial concubine clans, and the militarization of local power structures collectively created a world where traditional Confucian political ideals were increasingly difficult to maintain. Cao Cao's rise did not stem from his status as a classical moral exemplar, but rather from his identity as a pragmatic politician forced to operate within a disintegrating order. Placing Cao Cao's historical background within its historical context is crucial for understanding the tone and thematic structure of his poetry. While early Han writings often sought to subvert individual emotion in favor of ethico-dictical expressions, Cao Cao's verse does not shy away from instability, mortality, and the forces of history. Cao Cao's poetry is a lived expression, written in the tumultuous context in which it was also created. For that reason, the themes present in his verse cannot be seen as an intellectual exercise in reflection, but rather as an authentic, immediate response to the present. This conclusion is critical for an interpretation of his poetry. Fu writes in his book that a large portion of his research is dedicated to describing how Cao Cao promoted virtuous individuals to office and created a more liberal environment for free post and speeches [6].

Xu Gongchi's discussion of Cao Cao in the relevant chapter of his *Wei Jin wenxue shi* can be read as a literary-historical response to this political reality. Xu does not merely regard Cao Cao as a ruler with a talent for poetry who happened to be exceptionally gifted. On the contrary, Xu emphasizes the emergence of Cao Cao as a conscious lyrical subject and his works reflect a fundamental transformation of literary foundation. Xu believes that Jian'an 建安 poetry [7] marks the transformation of literature from moral decoration or political accessory to a medium for expressing histori-

cal consciousness and personal experience. Cao Cao's central position in this transformation stems precisely from his core political power, not his marginal role.

From the two perspectives, Cao Cao, in the usual sense, has become a poet who reflects on life and society through poetry. Cao Cao's frequent use of yuefu 乐府[8] titles was not to passively inherit the tradition, but to actively transform the existing form to adapt to the new historical content. From a historical perspective, the choice of this form reflects the instability of the cultural model of the late Eastern Han Dynasty [9]. From the perspective of literary history, it marks the emergence of a new subject of poetry, which pursues the adequacy of expression, rather than formal rules. Therefore, Cao Cao's poetry is in a transitional position, which is not only rooted in tradition, but also facing the unique future literary aesthetics of the Wei and Jin Dynasties.

In this sense, Cao Cao was the bridge between the late Eastern Han Dynasty and the literary and cultural traditions of the Wei and Jin Dynasties. The historical turmoil of his era provided conditions for the emergence of a new poetic consciousness, and his literary works reflected the early emphasis on individuality, timeliness and existentialism in the Wei and Jin Dynasties. Therefore, combining Xu Gongchi's literary analysis with the historical research of Cao Cao in the late Eastern Han Dynasty helps us to understand his poetry more comprehensively and regard it as the product of historical disasters and the catalyst for literary change.

Chinese writers and critics throughout history have been particularly interested in several aspects of Cao Cao as both a historical and literary figure.

First, the moral image of Cao always causes a great discussion among writers and critics. He has always been described as both an inexorability and ruthless person and a brilliant realist. He is intelligent but also cunning and deceitful. Traditional Confucian scholars criticized him for his ambition, political manipulation and perceived lack of moral virtue especially compared with the loyal and virtuous image of Liu Bei 刘备. Both Tao Cao xiwen 讨曹檄文 by Chen Lin 陈琳 and "Cao Man zhuan" 曹操传 criticize Cao Cao primarily in moral terms, portraying him as intelligent but deceitful and treacherous, while paying little attention to his military competence and strategic achievements [10]. In ancient Chinese history, loyalty and kindness were considered as the most important virtues under the influence of Confucianism. However, later writers and critics have reinterpreted these same qualities as signs of pragmatism, political intelligence and effectiveness. This moral ambiguity has made him a controversial figure that could be constantly interpreted in different ways.

Furthermore, Cao Cao's extraordinary political and outstanding military ability have always attracted sustained attention. As a strategist and administrator during the chaotic end of the Han dynasty, he demonstrated exceptional organizational talent and strategic foresight. Many historians and writers have acknowledged his role in reuniting northern China, restoring agricultural production through policies such as the tuntian 屯田 and strengthening central authority during a period of political fragmentation. His leadership during major battles has been a key subject of historical and literary analysis [11]. One poem written by Cao that impresses me is "Viewing the Ocean" 观沧海. From this work, I can feel his joy of the victory and his great ambition.

East looking down from Chieh-shih,
 I scan the endless ocean:
 waters restlessly seething,
 mountained islands jutting up,
 trees growing in clusters,
 a hundred grasses, rich and lush [12].

东临碣石，以观沧海。
 水何澹澹，山岛竦峙。
 树木丛生，百草丰茂。
 秋风萧瑟，洪波涌起。
 日月之行，若出其中；
 星汉灿烂，若出其里。
 幸甚至哉，歌以咏志。

In this poem, we can see not only his political ambition but also his literary attainment. Unlike many other generals, he was not only a military leader but also a poet. His poems reflect the anxieties, ambitions and ideals of a man living in an age of political collapse and renewal. Later literary critics valued his contributions to Jian'an literature and studied his writing style as an expression of both personal and political vision. This dual identity as both general and poet makes him unique in Chinese cultural history.

The most important influence on critiques of Cao is the time period in which they were written. During the end of the Han dynasty, when Cao was alive, there were two kinds of discussion. One was by his underlings, to praise and compliment him. Another was by his enemies, to slander him. In the following dynasty, there was a phenomenon that unified countries were more likely to appreciate his strengths while countries with constant wars usually criticized him. For example, the historical work *Sanguo zhi* during the relatively stable period of the Western Jin dynasty acknowledged Cao's political and military abilities. By contrast, later literary traditions the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, written in a period that strongly emphasized loyalty to the Han dynasty, portrayed him as a cunning and morally questionable figure [13]. A unified dynasty needs to promote order, authority and governance efficiency. The policies and measures adopted by Cao precisely align with the governance methods of the imperial court. In comparison, during the period of division, the ruling regime needs to strengthen its own legitimacy and moral superiority even more. Criticizing Cao was both a requirement of political propaganda and an embodiment of the Confucian concept of loyalty to the monarch.

Generally speaking, Chinese writers and critics have been most interested in Cao Cao's moral ambiguity, political and military talent and literary achievements. These aspects have turned him into one of the most complex and influential figures in Chinese history and even in today's life.

Cao Cao's literary achievement, however, does not stand in isolation. In the broader history of Chinese literature, it is rare to encounter a single family in which a father and two sons all attained lasting canonical status as writers. The Cao family represents a particularly significant moment in which the integration of political power and literary creation converged within the same family. While Cao Cao established the

musicality and thematic foundation of the Jian'an literary spirit that characterized by directness, historical consciousness and the profoundness of emotions, his sons Cao Pi 曹丕 and Cao Zhi 曹植 further transformed, expanded and diversified this emerging aesthetic. Their works not only reflect their personalities but also embody their political status and cultural aspirations as times changed.

If Cao Cao's poetry was born in the direct context of war and institutional collapse, then the literary works of Cao Pi and Cao Zhi were developed in the relatively stable but fiercely competitive court environment in the early Wei Dynasty. Therefore, the inheritance of literary skills between Cao Cao and his successors is not a simple transmission of literary skills, but reflects the transformation of sensibility, genre and self-shaping. Investigating the inseparable relationship between Cao Cao and this huge family literary system in the eyes of modern people, in which power, author identity and historical memory are closely intertwined, seems to provide a way to understand the enduring significance of Cao Cao's image in contemporary culture.

Cao Cao's, and Cao Pi and Cao Zhi's literary achievements figure very central place in the cultural history of the late Eastern Han and early Three Kingdoms period. Despite belonging to the same family, the three figures wrote under more or less the same political conditions. On the other hand, their writings exhibit both significant similarities and differences which cannot be understood merely in terms of aesthetics, but rather in relation to each individual's political role, personal circumstances and historical position. Altogether, the three Caos can be understood to illustrate how the literature of the Jian'an era functions as something more than art than as art, but rather as something more engaged in, and integrated in, the structural dynamics.

For the same characteristics, the three figures provide an excellent example of what later would be termed the Jian'an spirit, an emotion laden, historiographical conscious and urgent literary style. Living in an age of warfare, dynastic collapse and political uncertainty, the Caos wrote in a context where literature carried the weight of history. Their works explore themes such as loyalty and the fate of the country, reflecting a collective consciousness that personal life and political fate are inseparable. In addition, in the process of transitioning Chinese characters from traditional Chinese characters to more expressive characters, these three writers promoted the development of literature from simple personal expression to a medium of public significance.

However, despite these broad similarities, there are also differences between them. These differences are closely related to their political status. As the ruler of northern China, Cao Cao's writing style is mainly based on reality. His poems are often characterized by cold heroism and realism. His works combine thinking about life and death with the firm determination to act in history.

Cao Cao's literary works do not indulge in personal emotions, but express a public voice, closely connecting his personal ambitions with the fate of the country. Therefore, his works show a kind of political realism, in which poetry becomes an extension of leadership, emphasizing decisiveness, tenacity and a sense of responsibility.

Compared with his father, Cao Pi represented another form of the relationship between literature and power. As the founder of the Wei Dynasty, his literary identity was more shaped by his goal of constructing legitimacy rather than determined by his military experience. According to David R. Knechtges, Cao Pi used the method of

refusal to gain the support of the general public and to make the regime more legitimate [14]. Unlike his father's emotionally intense poetic style, Cao Pi's literary orientation was more institutionalized and standardized. He regarded writing as a tool for culture governance, a means to develop standards and assess talent. He also tended to be restrained and stable in his literary style, which aligned well with his political goal of consolidating the ruling order through rituals, discourse and ideology. In this sense, Cao Pi turned literature to a part of political order.

Cao Zhi presented a third literary model. In his early life, he was a popular choice of the prince due to his exceptional ability, but after losing the power in the succession battle, he was constantly under surveillance and restrictions. This political marginalization profoundly influenced his literary expression. Cao Zhi's poetry is known for its deeply emotional lyrics and delicate sentiments [15]. Unlike Cao Cao's majestic style or Cao Pi's standardized rhetoric, his writing was more from the perspective of the disadvantaged. His works repeatedly expressed the frustration of unfulfilled ambitions, loneliness and dejection, and inner pain. Modern research shows that this image not only stems from his personal experiences but is also the result of the joint construction of political circumstances and latter narratives. Therefore, Cao Zhi's literary style can be regarded as a response to the exclusion from power, he transformed political frustration into enduring aesthetic value.

In sum, the similarities and differences in literature between Cao Cao, Cao Pi, and Cao Zhi reveal the profound entanglement between aesthetics and politics during the Jian'an period. This is most visible in Cao Cao's "Duan gexing" 短歌行, in which the longing for worthy men simultaneously functions as lyrical confession and political recruitment. Cao Pi's "Yan gexing" 燕歌行 channels the era's displacement and grief into intimate lyrical form. While his critical writings explicitly frame literature as a great enterprise of state, a glory that does not decay, revealing how his personal emotion and historical consciousness were inseparable for Jian'an writers. This dynamic change is particularly evident in Cao Zhi's creative trajectory: the triumphant heroism overflowing in the *Baima Pian* 白马篇 he created when he was favored was gradually replaced by the image of confinement and frustration in his later works - the change of his political wealth directly affected his aesthetic style. Their works show that literature is not an isolated cultural field, but a dynamic space where strong power, emotion and historical consciousness are constantly intertwined. By comparing these three writers, we can not only trace the development vein of early mediaeval Chinese literature but also have a deeper understanding of how personal destiny and political structure jointly shape artistic expression.

The case of the Cao family shows that historical figures are not immutable in cultural memory, but are reinterpreted over time through literary performance, moral discourse and social needs. Cao Cao's image transformation from a royal warlord to a literary prototype to a modern cultural symbol reveals the plasticity of historical identity in the long history. However, the process of reinterpretation of historical figures does not stop at the moral or literary reconstruction. The more radical transformation of historical figures can be seen in other cases when historical figures are moved beyond political and literary memory to religious veneration.

While this is true of many historical figures, the case of Guan Yu 关羽, another key personality of this era, exemplifies the dynamism of popular memory. Unlike Cao Cao, whose image oscillates between villainy and pragmatism, Guan Yu's legacy has gradually widened from that of a loyal general to a moral exemplar and then to a deified cultural icon. Examining the process through which Guan Yu has been interpreted over the centuries and understanding why he came to be perceived as a god reveals the broader mechanisms through which historical memory, moral ideology, and popular belief intersect in Chinese society.

Guan Yu is known to the world as a general living during the late Eastern Han Dynasty and Three Kingdoms period. He was always regarded as a loyal figure of Shu 蜀 Kingdom. However, with the development of the changing of his story and title, Guan Yu was gradually reimagined as a moral exemplar, supernatural protector and eventually a fully deified figure known as Guandi 关帝. As Prasenjit Duara argues, this transformation occurred not through a single rupture but through a long process of symbolic accumulation that he terms "superscription", whereby successive religious, social and political groups layered new meanings onto Guan Yu's image without erasing older ones [16]. Through this process, Guan Yu came to be understood not merely as a heroic man but also as a god whose authority extended across religious, social and imperial domains.

The earliest reinterpretation of Guan Yu occurred during the Tang 唐 Dynasty, when Buddhist communities incorporated him into their religious worldview [17]. This incident embodies the concept of cause-and-effect transmigration in Buddhism. In that period, the Buddhism was developing quickly and tried to match the cultural significance of Confucianism. These reinterpretations did not replace the Buddhist image of Guan Yu as a guardian but coexisted with it, adding another layer to his growing symbolic authority. Later, in the Song 宋 Dynasty, Daoism further expanded Guan Yu's divine identity. His military power was interpreted as metaphysical power at that time. However, the interpretations did not replace the Buddhist image of Guan Yu as a guardian but coexisted with it, adding another layer to his growing symbolic authority. During Ming 明 and Qing 清 Dynasties, the belief in Guan among the common people expanded quickly, mainly with popular of novels or operas. The economic commercialization and social mobility weakened traditional kinship structures, creating a society of strangers that required new moral and symbolic foundations. Merchants adopted Guan Yu as a symbol of trust, honest and contractual integrity, even venerating him as a god of wealth. Some non-governmental organizations emphasized his spirit of loyalty and righteousness and regarded him as a guardian deity [18]. Each of these groups emphasized different aspects of Guan Yu's character and together pushed him towards deification.

The government played a decisive role in consolidating Guan's deification. Guan was widely accepted as the embodiment of loyalty and righteousness. Especially in the Song Dynasty, dominated by Confucianism, the emperors repeatedly canonized Guan Yu with increasingly exalted titles, raising him from a local hero to the official God of war [19]. This institutionalization turned Guan Yu into a symbol of imperial order, moral discipline and national unity.

Comparing Guan to the Song Dynasty's Yue Fei 岳飞, who is also highly respected and famous for his military power, Guan has his own advantages to become a god. The most important reason is that Yue Fei was only worshipped by the common people and was not officially recognized. This was because it was framed as a threat to the imperial power. Guan Yu is more obedient to political power, which is in line with the official discourse. Although many historical figures are like this, the example of Guan Yu, another key figure during this period, reflects the dynamic changes in folk memory. Unlike Cao Cao's image, which fluctuated between villains and pragmatism, Guan Yu's image gradually evolved from a loyal general to a moral role model and finally became a deified cultural idol. It examines people's interpretation of Guan Yu's image for centuries and explores the reason why he was finally worshipped as a god, revealing the deeper mechanism of historical memory, moral concepts and folk beliefs intertwined in Chinese society.

The lasting influence of Cao Cao, Guan Yu and other figures in modern society shows that the historical identity is not immutable, but is constantly reshaped through mechanisms such as literary narrative, moral reconstruction and cultural inheritance. Cao Cao's transformation from an imperial warlord to a controversial cultural symbol, and the rare literary combination of the Cao family, highlights how political authority and the author's identity are integrated, thus producing lasting symbolic meaning. At the same time, Guan Yu went from a historical general to a moral role model, and finally becoming a god's gradual promotion, which depicts a more profound process: the transformation from historical memory to religion and popular worship.

In a word, the study of the historical evolution of the war hero Guan Yu provides us with a multi-level perspective on how deification is constructed, disseminated and maintained. By examining Guan Yu's narrative evolution in the fields of literature, religion and politics, we can find that Guan Yu's identity is not limited to a single historical moment, but a process of meaning that transcends time and space and goes back and forth. It reflects the historical power and influence of the Cao Cao family, as well as the process of religion and myth that shapes our understanding of gods. This case study reveals the interrelated forces that shape the formation and dissemination of historical identity, as well as the dynamic relationship between history, mythology, politics and religion in shaping the cognitive process of cultural symbols.

As mentioned earlier, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 三国演义 is hailed as one of China's most famous literary works. In the book, Liu Bei 刘备 and Cao Cao are portrayed as two diametrically opposed figures in terms of morality and politics. Liu Bei is depicted as a benevolent, loyal, and virtuous ruler, embodying the Confucian ideal of virtuous governance. Cao Cao, on the other hand, is portrayed as an ambitious, cunning, and morally corrupt ruler, although he is also widely recognized as an outstanding military commander. For example, in the passage describing the Battle of Guandu 官渡之战, while Cao Cao's strategic talent is acknowledged, the narrative focuses on his ruthless methods of political maneuvering, while Liu Bei's minor victories are emphasized as proof of his high moral character and the legitimacy of his rule. This literary technique is not only entertaining but also conveys to the reader the moral lesson that a balance must be maintained between political and military talent and moral integrity. Consequently, *Romance of three kingdoms* has considerably

influenced popular perceptions of Cao Cao and Liu Bei, portraying Cao Cao as a morally ambiguous "villainous hero" and Liu Bei as the model of the right leader.

If we are interested in how Cao Cao's image persists in contemporary culture today not to say that we simply inherit it as in the traditional idea of cultural inheritance, but instead that we reproduce its conditions of transmission in order to reproduce its contested nature. In addition to the cultural capital of Chinese historiography, as well as our knowledge of contemporary Chinese culture, the key to understanding the continued resonance of the Cao Cao character is in his status as "an object for use" in a variety of cultural discourses, an object both for which and about which people are competing. Though this might be viewed as an apparent paradox, it is in fact a basic fact about all cultural production: art works only insofar as they form a relation with a subject, though the nature of that relation, and which position that subject takes in it, are in themselves subject to negotiation. Therefore, the enduring presence of Cao Cao's image in contemporary culture not only demonstrates our continued fascination with historical memory but also proves that the contradictions it embodies still hold contemporary relevance. Despite the proliferation of his image across various media, from television dramas to video games, he remains a forum for cultural negotiation, and his moral ambiguity allows him to be appropriated by virtually any ideology. What's most striking, then, is not that we see him so often, but that we see him in such conflicting and incompatible forms, as villain and as visionary, as tyrant and as pragmatist: and it is precisely this instability that is so meaningful. The point is that Cao Cao's symbolic function is one of continuous mutation, less a matter of what he historically was than of what this or that moment needs him to be. How this happens is perhaps more evident in the case of videogames than in many other forms of production: where the question of historical representation does not present itself as an abstract or philosophical problem but is instead built right into the mechanics of the system. *Total War: Three Kingdoms* by Creative Assembly is an instructive example. Initially the game is offered to players with a choice of a 'Historic' mode, based on the *Sanguozhi* and its associated scholarly construction of the early Han dynasty, and of a 'Romance' mode based on the novelistic tradition as established in Luo Guanzhong's *Sanguozhi*. If Cao Cao emerges as a calculative but thematically coherent hero in the first mode, he tends to be far more the scheming, evil antagonist in the second. Now this of itself is nothing exceptional: the idea to reproduce multiple, contradictory modes of historical representation within one game system is by no means unique to *Total War*. And far from being what makes this the most interesting game of the decade, in my view the most interesting thing about *Total War: Three Kingdoms* is the fact that it doesn't resolve this tension, instead it is built to monetize it, to be played and enjoyed as both registers simultaneously. The fact that *Total War's* business-model has continued successfully to cater to both modes of play might seem to suggest that the two are non-contradictory and thus not actually in conflict. But the reality is that this sort of game has only become commercially successful because it resonates with a way of seeing the past that is in turn linked to the sort of present for which it produces a subject. Or, to use the phrase that the game's art director has used to describe his vision of the game's historical meaning to players "to make the past a place that players feel at home" at. A game only works (for this or that player), of

course, by fulfilling the player's needs (for this or that kind of subject) and so the success of a game like *Total War* in reproducing two competing historical subject-positions is itself a sign that those two subject-positions are both in play in the same moment. The argument between that history and legend, between the *Sanguozhi*, and the *Yanyi*, the one which scholars have rehearsed throughout the ages, reoccurs in the new media as a feature rather than a problem. Cao Cao, in other words, is incapable of enduring without being open for interpretation. He survives not in spite of his contradictions, but because of them, because questions of power, legitimacy, and moral compromise do not admit of settled answers, and because his image has proven capacious enough to hold all of them at once. In this sense, the widespread spread of Cao Cao's image in contemporary times is not so much a deviation from historical tradition as a logical continuation: each image reshaping reflects that different countries use Cao Cao to deal with its unresolved authoritative relationship. In addition, Cao Cao's image is widely spread on social media, and even appears in emoji packs and short videos. His cunning or charm is exaggerated to achieve humor or dramatic effects, which shows that the audience is constantly exploring his image in an innovative and interactive way.

3 Conclusion

These examples show that the lasting existence of characters in the contemporary media and public imagination of the Three Kingdoms period does not only stem from nostalgia or narrative traditions, but also because their image adapts to the recurring social concerns - Cao Cao symbolizes power and legitimacy, while Guan Yu symbolizes loyalty and justice. Every era will reinterpret and select these characters to cope with their anxiety about authority and morality and establish their collective identity. In this sense, what persists in modern society and penetrates into contemporary culture is not only the historical figures of the past, but also a flexible and constantly reshaping symbolic framework. In other words, Cao Cao's visibility in modern times is not a continuation of the past, but a continuous reconstruction of the past.

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6. Fu Gang, *Hanwei Liuchao wenxue yu wenxian lungao*, P251, ISBN 9787100113601
7. The Jian'an era (196–220 CE) of the late Eastern Han dynasty was marked by political fragmentation and warfare. Writers such as Cao Cao and his sons were central figures in this literary movement, whose works often combine personal emotion with reflexions on war, loyalty, and political ambition.
8. Yuefu (乐府) originally referred to the Music Bureau established during the Han dynasty, which was responsible for collecting folk songs and composing music for court rituals and entertainment. Over time, the term came to denote a poetic genre based on these songs, characterized by relatively flexible forms and themes often drawn from everyday life, social hardship, and war.
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