

Chapter I

AGING WITH FELLOW MORTALS

UPON THE FALL of the Han empire, the warlord Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220) took the emperor under his control and established his military-political community in the North China Plain. He constantly confronted death, but grieved when Guo Jia 郭嘉 (170–207)—the youngest among his military consultants—passed away. He revealed to the other consultants what Guo Jia’s death meant to the community:¹

You gentlemen are about the same age as I am. Fengxiao [style name of Guo Jia], being the youngest, was an exception. My plan was to entrust the remaining tasks to him when I am done with my work on the realm, but he died early in his middle years. This is fate!

諸君年皆孤輩也，唯奉孝最少，天下事竟，欲以後事屬之，而中年夭折，命也夫！

Cao Cao presented a memorial to the emperor for a posthumous award for Guo Jia, indicating it was not only to care for the bereaved but also to hearten newcomers (褒亡為存，厚往勸來也).² Besides requesting a posthumous award, how did he mentally and emotionally sustain a community grieving for its absent youth, or more broadly, an aging community?

In this chapter I will first argue that the so-called “inauspicious” lines in his well-known “Short Song” (Duan ge xing 短歌行) is part of a sentimental song in which Cao Cao, as a charismatic host of a feast, negotiates meanings of life with his guests. Then, I will discuss how Cao Cao integrates seemingly incongruous elements—transcendence arts, coffin-carrying songs, and his military expeditions—into a musical performance. Finally, by placing his song verse “Striding Out of the Spacious Gate” (Bu chu xiamen xing 步出夏門行) in this rich context, I will explore how Cao Cao changes his poetic identity from that of a roaming transcendent to that of an aging fine steed, and what this change could have meant to an aging community that still aspired to run a thousand *li* with fellow mortals.

1 *Sanguo zhi jijie*, 14.1292.

2 *Sanguo zhi jijie*, 14.1293.

Negotiation

Cao Cao has been shaped as a villain who killed carelessly while drinking and singing. In episode 48 of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Sanguo yanyi 三國演義), he held a feast prior to the Battle of the Red Cliff. Half-drunk, with a halberd in hand, he sang the “Short Song” with these famous opening lines: “With wine and songs before us— / How long can human life last? / Like the morning dews— / The days gone by are all too many.” Among the audience, Liu Fu 劉馥 (d. 208) considered the penultimate stanza inauspicious, suggestive of their loss in the forthcoming battle: “The moon is bright, the stars are few, / Crows and magpies are flying south. / Thrice they circle a tree, / On what branch can they roost?” Annoyed by the comment, Cao Cao reportedly killed Liu Fu with the halberd in hand. This violence proves fictional, for Liu Fu had died before Cao Cao launched this military campaign.³ Nevertheless, the *Romance* storyteller captures two elements of Cao Cao’s “Short Song”: the performative nature and a sentimental tone.

The “Short Song” belongs to a poetic genre known as “music bureau poetry” (*yuefu shi* 樂府詩). Here I follow the Han practice to refer to such poems as “song verses” (*geshi* 歌詩), whose musical performances are vividly described in the “Seven Elucidations” (*Qi shi* 七釋) by the Cao court poet Wang Can 王粲 (177–217):⁴

於是白日西移	Thereupon the blazing sun shifts west,
轉即閑堂	People turn about and enter an idle hall.
號鍾絙瑟	The Sounding Bell [of Bo Ya] and the tautly strung zitherns
列乎洞房	Are arrayed in connecting rooms.
管簫繁會	Flutes and panpipes in a profuse ensemble
雜以笙簧	Is mingled with mouth organs.
夔牙之師	Music masters like Kui and Bo Ya,
呈能極方	Demonstrate their skills and exhaust their arts.
奏白雪之高均	They perform the lofty tune of “White Snow,”
弄幽徵與反商	Play the sombre <i>zhi</i> note and reverted <i>shang</i> note.
聲流暢以清哇	The sound flows easy and smooth, brisk and voluptuous,
時忼慨而激揚	Sometimes impassioned, intensely rousing.

3 *Sanguo zhi jijie*, 15.1353n1.

4 *Ri cang Hongren ben*, 414.131.

虞公含詠	The Venerable Yu mouths a song,
陳惠清微	Chen Hui sounds brisk and soft.
新聲變用	New music and altered application,
慘悽增悲	Sad and heart-wrenching, bring more sorrow.
聽者動容	Those who listen change their expressions,
梁塵為飛	Dust on the rafters is made to fly up.

As the last few lines indicate, the primary aesthetics of song performance in Han times lay in *bei* 悲, which can be translated as “sorrow” or more neutrally, “sentiments.” To such sentimental music that “moves” the audience as well as the dust on the rafters, Cao Cao composes “Short Song” to negotiate meanings of life with his audience:⁵

對酒當歌	With wine and songs before us—
人生幾何	How long can human life last?
譬如朝露	Like the morning dews—
4 去日苦多	The days gone by are all too many.
慨當以慷	Impassioned and fervid,
憂思難忘	We cannot forget these worries.
何以解憂	How can we banish our worries?
8 唯有杜康	Only by Du Kang’s gift of wine.
青青子衿	Blue, blue is your lapel,
悠悠我心	Ever, ever in my heart.
但為君故	Only because of you
12 沈吟至今	I have sunk in musing.
呦呦鹿鳴	<i>?jiou-?jiou</i> call the deer,
食野之芣	Eating cudweed in the field.
我有嘉賓	I have fine guests—
16 鼓瑟吹笙	Strum the zitherns! Blow the reed organs!
明明如月	Bright, bright is the moon,
何時可掇	Can it ever be grasped?
憂從中來	Worries come from within,
20 不可斷絕	In an unbreakable chain.

5 *Wen xuan*, 27.1281–82. For my discussion of the *Song shu* version (21.610), which I suspect to be an abridgement, see Shih, “Into the New Realm of *Belles lettres*,” 46–47.

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| 越陌度阡 | Crossing paths, traversing lanes, |
| 枉用相存 | You have deigned to inquire after me. |
| 契闊談讌 | After long separation, here we converse and feast, |
| 24 心念舊恩 | Recalling former friendships to our hearts. |
| 月明星稀 | The moon is bright, the stars are few, |
| 烏鵲南飛 | Crows and magpies are flying south. |
| 繞樹三匝 | Thrice they circle a tree, |
| 28 何枝可依 | On what branch can they roost? |
| 山不厭高 | The mountain is not satiated with height, |
| 海不厭深 | The sea is not satiated with depth. |
| 周公吐哺 | The Duke of Zhou spat out his food, |
| 32 天下歸心 | All under Heaven turned their hearts unto him. |

Just as many Chinese sentences come without a grammatical subject, so does the opening line of Cao Cao's "Short Song." I had rendered the opening line with a personal "I" and read this person as Cao Cao. With a feast and an audience in mind, nevertheless, I decided to render the line with an impersonal "us,"⁶ which is echoed by a general reference to human beings in the second line: "With wine and songs before us— / How long can human life last?" Having lamented the brevity of life in the first stanza, "we" ask: "How can we banish our worries?" Such worries reappear in the odd-numbered stanzas. The fifth and seventh stanzas further turn to the night sky. The bright moon hangs out of reach. The birds fly without rest. If this song verse was performed after sunset, these melancholic evening scenes must have been quite moving.

While the odd-numbered stanzas prompt worries, the even-numbered stanzas adapt the strategy of multipartite suasion from the sevens (*qi* 七) to provide solutions. The sevens, as the name indicates, is structured with seven enticements presented by one persuader (or several) to another person. The most common enticements of the sevens are a lavish feast, a palatial mansion, a musical performance, and a grand hunt. Cao Cao's "Short Song" consists of eight stanzas, every two of which constitute a mini exchange of an enticement: Du Kang in the second stanza, which refers to his invention of wine,⁷ is the enticement in response to the worry that "the days gone by

⁶ For a discussion of impersonal pronouns, see Harbsmeier, "Xunzi and the Problem of Impersonal First Person Pronouns," 181–220.

⁷ Xu, *Shuowen jiezi zhu*, 7b.52a (361), in the entry of 鬲.

are all too many” in the first stanza. And interestingly, the classic poem “Your Lapel” (Zi jin 子衿, *Mao shi* 毛詩 91) quoted in the third stanza is matched by another classic poem “Call the Deer” (Lu ming 鹿鳴, *Mao shi* 161) quoted in the fourth stanza. The beloved one who wears a “blue, blue lapel” in the former poem now seems to be entertained with a feast that is described in the latter poem. By separating the classic lines from their contexts and incorporating them into his new song verse, Cao Cao transforms the diplomatic tradition of citing a *Shi jing* 詩經 poem into his own mode of song verse composition. Then, the bright moon in the fifth stanza represents something unreachable, but old friends in the sixth stanza shorten the distance. “Crossing paths, traversing lanes,” they visit one another from afar after long separation. The last enticement about the revival of a sagely rule is even more joyful. He is like the Duke of Zhou 周公 (fl. 1042–1035 BCE), so afraid to lose an interview with an outstanding man that “in washing my hair, I must thrice catch the wet hair up; and in having my meal, I must thrice spit the food out.”⁸ The crows and magpies in the seventh stanza represent the travelling scholars who could not find an understanding lord. Upon meeting a fine lord like Cao Cao, who would not find rest? What sagely rule could not be revived?

Cao Cao tells of worries in the four odd-numbered stanzas, and provides enticements as solutions—drinking, feasting, mutual understanding, and the revival of a sagely rule—in the four even-numbered stanzas. By blending sorrow with joy, Cao Cao presents his suasion, leading his audience to reflect on the reason why they are here. Is it for drinking to forget the brevity of life, or to feast with their beloved one? Do they simply hope to visit old friends, or to achieve something great together so that they can say it is worth living? The multipartite structure implies the answer. The so-called “inauspicious” lines, therefore, are not an omen of defeat or a catalyst for violence as the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* claims, but rather part of a sentimental song by which the charismatic host Cao Cao negotiates meanings of life with his guests. It is the recurrence of worries that forms a continuous, sentimental tone appealing to the audience; it is with the four enticements that Cao Cao entertains his guests and arouses lofty aspirations in them despite the brevity of life.

⁸ Han, *Han shi waizhuan jinzhu jinyi*, 3.135; Han, *Han shi wai chuan*, 3/31 (114).

Transcendence

In addition to earthly enticements, the arts of transcendence were also adopted in Han times in response to the brevity of life. Some conducted physical practices such as avoiding grains and taking alchemical drugs to prolong life; others sought for the land of transcendents (*xian* 仙),⁹ especially the Penglai Island in the east and Mount Kunlun in the west, to learn the secrets of eternal life. To Emperor Wu of Han 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE), it was both and beyond. According to a Daoist adept called Li Shaojun 李少君, the emperor had to offer sacrifice to the deity of the stove to obtain materials that transform cinnabar into gold. By eating and drinking from vessels made of the gold, he could prolong his years and be able to visit transcendents on the Penglai Island. In addition to such a visit, the emperor was advised to perform *feng* 封 and *shan* 禪 sacrifices as the legendary Yellow Emperor presumably did. When all the measures were carried out, the adept claimed, the emperor could achieve deathlessness.¹⁰

Conditions did not allow Cao Cao to undertake this imperial project. Instead, he shows his interest in the arts of transcendence in seven song verses: one by the title of “Moshang sang” 陌上桑, three by “Qi chu chang” 氣出唱, one by “Jing lie” 精列, and two by “Qiu Hu xing” 秋胡行.¹¹ These poems describe wanders to the land of the transcendents and visits to the transcendents, as Cao Cao’s “Moshang sang” sings: “Galloping the rainbows, / Riding the red clouds, / I climb Mount Jiuyi and pass the Jade Gate [of Heaven]. / Crossing the Han River in Heaven [i.e., Milky Way], / Arriving at Mount Kunlun, / I meet with the Queen Mother of the West and visit the Lord of the East.” These are called “roaming-into-transcendence” (*you xian* 遊仙) poems in traditional categorization.

Like the “Short Song,” these song verses were meant to be sung. The music was lost, but the lyrics are extant in historical records, especially in the “Monograph on Music” (Yue zhi 樂志) of the *Song shu* 宋書, thanks to the indispensable role of music in state sacrifices, court ceremonies, and royal entertainments. Most of the received song verses attributed to Cao Cao were “accompanied” (*xianghe* 相和) songs, which were sung by a bamboo-clapper holder in a musical ensemble.¹² And according to Pei Songzhi’s 裴松之 (372–451) commentary on Cao Cao’s biography in the *Sanguo zhi* 三國志,

9 Company, *Making Transcendents*, 33–34.

10 *Shi ji*, 12.455.

11 For a discussion of these seven song verses, see Company, *Making Transcendents*, 142–43.

12 *Song shu*, 21.603. Also see *Yuefu shiji*, 26.377.

“whenever [Cao Cao] composed poems, he had them set to wind and string accompaniment, so that they all became musical pieces.”¹³

The popularity of the accompanied songs can be observed from the “Rhapsody on the Long Flute” (Changdi fu 長笛賦) by the Eastern-Han writer and musician Ma Rong 馬融 (79–166). In the preface he tells how excited he was upon hearing “Qi chu [chang]” and “Jing lie” played on the flute by someone from the capital Luoyang 洛陽 (present-day Luoyang, Henan): “I have been away from the capital for over a year and, upon hearing this music, I suddenly felt both sad and happy over it.”¹⁴ To these two songs from the capital Luoyuan, Cao Cao composed his roaming-into-transcendence poems. While Ma Rong enjoyed the flute music alone, it is more likely that Cao Cao’s poems were presented at a convivial gathering. His third song verse by the title of “Qi chu chang” ends with a feasting scene that is almost indistinguishable from an earthly one, with the host and guests wishing each other longevity:¹⁵

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| 東西廂 | In the east and west wings, |
| 客滿堂 | Guests pack the halls. |
| 主人當行觴 | The host attends to offering toasts: |
| 坐者長壽遽何央 | “May all in the seats enjoy a long life—is there even an end?” |
- 12 長樂甫始宜孫子 “Lasting joy is just beginning, fit for grandsons!
常願主人增年 We devoutly hope our host lives long,
與天相守 Stays intact with Heaven.”

This merry scene of drinking and wishing for longevity is also described by Cao Cao’s son Cao Zhi 曹植 (192–232) in his song verse “Harp Lay” (Konghou yin 箜篌引, also known as Yetian huangque xing 野田黃雀行, as noted in the *Song shu*; for the entire poem, see Chapter 4). We see how a gathering reached its climax:¹⁶

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| 樂飲過三爵 | Happily drinking, we exceed the three-beaker limit; |
| 緩帶傾庶羞 | Loosening our belts, we empty out the many delicacies. |
| 主稱千金壽 | The host wishes all a long life with a thousand in gold, |
| 12 賓奉萬年酬 | The guests propose a toast for his myriad-year life. |

13 *Sanguo zhi jijie*, 1.215; Frankel, “The Development of Han and Wei *Yüeh-fu*,” 262.

14 *Wen xuan*, 18.808; *Wen xuan or Selections*, 3:259.

15 *Song shu*, 21.604.

16 *Song shu*, 21.620; *Wen xuan*, 27.1286.

In this celebratory atmosphere, Cao Cao's first song verse by the title of "Qi chu chang" presents magical flights, each of which begins with a celestial vehicle (dragons, wind, clouds, deer, or the means of drinking jade elixir, which transforms a mortal person into a transcendent) and continues with a destination in the realm of transcendents (the sacred Mount Tai, the Penglai Island on the East Sea, or Heaven). A musician signals the transition of flights with a bamboo-clapper. There are also female dancers acting the transcendental roles of the "jade maidens," as Cao Cao's second song verse by the title of "Qi chu chang" sings: "Jade maidens rise, / They rise to dance and shift several times."¹⁷

As Lee Fong-Mao 李豐楙 shrewdly titles his 1996 book *Worries and Wanders* (You yu you 憂與遊), this joy of transcendence is often juxtaposed with expressions of sorrow in roaming-into-transcendence poetry.¹⁸ In some of his poems, Cao Cao does not provide any solutions to this sorrow. The sorrowful endings of those poems come as abruptly and painfully as death does to many. Take the "Jing lie" for example. In juxtaposition with a wish to visit Mount Kunlun and the Penglai Island is a repeating reminder that death is inevitable, even to sages like the Duke of Zhou and Confucius (551–479 BCE). The song verse concludes: "Having come to the evening years— / What can we do about it? / Gone is time and there is less time to come."¹⁹ A similar sigh can be heard in his second song verse by the title of "Qiu Hu xing": "Health and intelligence / Will never come back. / If one cherishes his time and works hard, / Whom will he benefit? / Idling and indulging oneself— / I do not see what that is for either."²⁰

In Confucian thought, an individual finds his proper position in society by nurturing himself with classical poetry and music, which value restrained emotions. Cao Cao entertained himself and his feasting guests with a new type of poetry and music: coffin-carrying songs (*wan ge* 挽歌). The Ming-dynasty scholar Zhu Jiazheng 朱嘉徵 (1602–1684) reminds us it was a common practice in Han times that people sang coffin-carrying songs at merry gatherings. That may be the reason, Zhu Jiazheng observes, for Cao Zhi's song verse "Harp Lay" to turn sharply from a feast to death: "Living an exis-

17 *Song shu*, 21.604. Huang Jie 黃節 (1873–1935) takes the "jade maiden" as the name of a peak. If so, we can imagine how the images of a sacred mountain, a female transcendent, and a dancer merge in the musical performance. For his note, see Cao et al., *Cao Zijian shi zhu (wai san zhong)*, 191.

18 Lee, *You yu you*, 6–12.

19 *Song shu*, 21.604.

20 *Song shu*, 21.612.

tence, we have ornate homes to rest; / Withering and wasting, we return to hilly graves.”²¹ In fact, a coffin-carrying song is even less restrained than Cao Zhi’s “Harp Lay.” Cao Zhi’s song verse at least offers solace with this conclusion: “Among those prior to us, who did not die? / Knowing fate, why worry anymore?” By contrast, a coffin-carrying song finds no solace: “On the shallot the dew— / How easily it dries! / The dew dries but next dawn, they will drop once more; / Human beings die but once gone, when will they come back?”²²

Just as the coffin-carrying singer posts a question about death that no one can answer, so does Cao Cao post questions about aging in his second song verse by the title of “Qiu Hu xing.” Through this type of poetry and music, he directly addressed mortality, expressed deep sorrow, and posed questions rather than answers. Life and death were juxtaposed; joy and sorrow were enjoyed at once. As part of this aesthetic and social approach to mortality, Cao Cao roamed not only into transcendence, but also out of it, with a heavy sigh that echoed in everyone’s heart.

Encounter

The arts of transcendence had long promised emperors and kings longevity, as well as disappointed them. What did Cao Cao, known for his skepticism, think of such arts? As anecdotes relate, when someone named Zuo Ci 左慈 claimed to master such arts, Cao Cao tested, humiliated, and even attempted to kill him.²³ This explains why Cao Cao casts doubts on the arts of transcendence in his roaming-into-transcendence poems.

Cao Cao takes another approach in his first song verse by the title of “Qiu Hu xing.” Instead of passively hearing about the transcendent and testing their authenticity, he shares his encounter with a transcendent on a military expedition. The song verse begins with a specific location, Mount Sanguan 散關山, which Cao Cao visited on his 215 CE military expedition against the Daoist kingdom of Zhang Lu 張魯 (d. 216).²⁴ The first section of the song verse reads:²⁵

21 *Song shu*, 21.620; *Wen xuan*, 27.1286. For Zhu Jiazheng’s comment, see Cao et al., *Cao Zijian shi zhu (wai san zhong)*, 95. Also see *Yuefu guangxu*, 8.4a (388).

22 For the song verse, titled “Dew on the Shallot” (Xie lu 薤露), see *Yuefu shiji*, 27.396. Also see Birrell, *Popular Songs and Ballads*, 75–81. For my further discussion, see Chapter 4.

23 Campana, *Making Transcendents*, chap. 7, “Adepts, Their Families, and the Imperium.”

24 *Sanguo zhi jijie*, 1.183.

25 *Song shu*, 21.610–11; for the variants, see *Yuefu shiji*, 36.526–27.

- 晨上散關山 At dawn I climb Mount Sanguan,
 此道當何難 How hard can this road be?
 晨上散關山 At dawn I climb Mount Sanguan,
 4 此道當何難 How hard can this road be?
 牛頓不起 Oxen collapse, not getting up;
 車墮谷間 Chariots fall into the valley.
 坐磐石之上 Sitting upon a boulder,
 8 彈五弦之琴 I play a five-stringed zither.
 作為清角韻 Making the *qingjue* tones,
 意中(述)[迷]煩 I feel puzzled and vexed.
 歌以言志 Let us sing to tell our aspirations.
 12 晨上散關山 At dawn I climb Mount Sanguan. (一解 section 1)

Line 8 surprises the audience, for zithers seldom enter the realm of military expeditions, especially when oxen collapse and chariots fall. Moreover, the zither is a five-stringed zither, which is an invention of the ancient sage Shun 舜. The tones it makes are the *qingjue* tones, which are played fast and at a high pitch, challenging for the ears of those deficient in virtue.²⁶ Having found troubles on the road, the speaker is even more troubled by the music. At this time of crisis, a mysterious figure titled “Thrice Venerable” appear in the second section (*jie* 解, a musical term comparable to a “movement” in a concerto):²⁷

- 有何三老公 Who is this Thrice Venerable,
 卒來在我傍 Suddenly coming to my side?
 有何三老公 Who is this Thrice Venerable,
 16 卒來在我傍 Suddenly coming to my side?
 (員)[負]揜被裘 Putting on overcoats, donning furs,
 似非恒人 He seems not to be an ordinary man.

²⁶ Liu et al., *Huainanzi jishi*, 2.109; Han, *Han Feizi jijie*, 3.65.

²⁷ I translate *Sanlao gong* 三老公 as a title instead of “three old men” because the Thrice Venerable surnamed Dong 三老董公 was well-known in Han times for his advice for Emperor Gaozu of Han 漢高祖 (r. 202–195 BCE), and *san* 三 in his title was understood as “much” in age. See *Shi ji*, 8.370. There was also a ceremony of feeding the Thrice Venerable, called *Sanshou* 三壽 in Zhang Heng’s 張衡 (78–139 CE) “Rhapsody on the Eastern Metropolis” (*Dongjing fu* 東京賦). See *Wen xuan*, 3.120; *Wen xuan or Selections*, 1:285 (line 488).

- 調卿云何 He says: "Why are you
 20 困苦以自怨 Constrained and troubled, loathing yourself?
 惶惶所欲 Why jumpy and uneasy at your longings,
 來到此間 Coming to this place?"
 歌以言志 Let us sing to tell our aspirations.
 24 有何三老公 Who is this Thrice Venerable? (二解 section 2)

With the sudden appearance of this Thrice Venerable and his speech, the audience finds the song verse not only a musical piece, but also a dramatic one. His clothing is unordinary, his words are intriguing, and his identity is yet to be revealed. The suspension arouses curiosity in the audience. From mountain climbing to zither playing to the sudden appearance of this mysterious figure, the song verse successfully puts itself under the spotlight.

The third section reveals his identity as a transcendent. Mount Sanguan is usually irrelevant to transcendence, but now becomes a site of witnessing the True Man from Mount Kunlun and makes the encounter all the more engaging. From free roaming to ascetic practices, lines 29–32 are packed with conventional vocabulary of transcendence arts. Line 32 is especially intimidating with its length and severity. While the protagonist hesitates, the transcendent leaves him behind:

- 我居崑崙山 "I live in Mount Kunlun,
 所謂者真人 Known as True Man.
 我居崑崙山 I live in Mount Kunlun,
 28 所謂者真人 Known as True Man.
 道深有可得 "The Way is profound yet attainable:
 名山歷觀 View all the famous mountains,
 遨遊八極 Roam and ramble to the Eight Limits,
 32 枕石漱流飲泉 Make rocks your pillow, rinse in currents, drink from springs."
 沈吟不決 Sunk in musing, I hesitate,
 遂上升天 Thereupon he ascends to Heaven.
 歌以言志 Let us sing to tell our aspirations.
 36 我居崑崙山 "I live in Mount Kunlun." (三解 section 3)

In the final section, the speaker keeps wailing until the pentasyllabic metre is replaced by a classical, tetrasyllabic metre. Line 43 "Upright and not deceitful" (正而不譎) is how Confucius described Lord Huan of Qi 齊桓公

(r. 685–643 BCE),²⁸ a hegemon who reputedly served the king of Zhou and fended off the “barbarians.” As a warlord who served the emperor of Han and fended off other warlords, Cao Cao is comparing himself to Lord Huan:

去去不可追	Gone, gone, he cannot be pursued,	
長恨相牽攀	I always regret attempting to catch hold of him.	
去去不可追	Gone, gone, he cannot be pursued,	
40 長恨相牽攀	I always regret attempting to catch hold of him.	
夜夜安得寐	Night after night, how can I sleep?	
惆悵以自憐	Low and down, I feel for myself.	
正而不譎	“Upright and not deceitful,”	
44 辭賦依因	Songs and rhapsodies are composed accordingly.	
經傳所過	This is what classics and traditions pass on,	
西來所傳	This is what is transmitted from the west.	
歌以言志	Let us sing to tell our aspirations.	
48 去去不可追	Gone, gone, he cannot be pursued.	(四解 section 4)

Lines 43–46 have been puzzling to commentators. To decipher those, we have to know not only what happened to Lord Huan in the western land, but also how the words *guo* 過 and *zhuan/chuan* 傳 were used in Han times. What happened to Lord Huan in the western land is the easier part. As late-Qing scholar Huang Jie 黃節 (1873–1935) points out, Lord Huan claimed to have launched a military expedition in the western land (西伐大夏，涉流沙).²⁹ Now that Cao Cao marches in the western land as Lord Huan did, the analogy is obvious. As for *guo* 過 and *zhuan/chuan* 傳, let us start with the latter word. In his study of transcendence arts in early medieval China, Robert Ford Campany pays special attention to how the adepts transmitted (*chuan* 傳) their traditions (*zhuan* 傳) to the public.³⁰ Cao Cao also uses the word both as a verb and as a noun. It is just that the tradition (noun) he transmits (verb) to his audience is not transcendence art, but that of an admirable hegemon like Lord Huan. What Huang Jie fails to recognize is that the word 過 was synonymous with the verb *chuan* 傳 “to transmit” in Han times. The two verbs were juxtaposed by the Eastern-Han scholar Wang Chong 王充 (27–post 100): “Just as postmen *pass on* letters, so do disciples *transmit*

²⁸ *Lun yu zhushu*, 14.7b (126).

²⁹ *Shi ji*, 28.1361, 32.1491.

³⁰ Campany, *Making Transcendents*, 11.

teachings (郵人之過書，門者之傳教也).³¹ Similarly, Cao Cao juxtaposes the synonymous verbs in lines 45–46: “This is what classics and traditions *pass on*, / This is what is *transmitted* from the west” (經傳所過，西來所傳). The “upright” legacy of Lord Huan, having been transmitted by classics and traditions from the western land, surpasses the “deceitful” arts of transcendence and reaffirms the legitimacy of Cao Cao’s military expedition.

Every section of this song verse ends with a line mirroring the opening and this expression: “Let us sing to tell our aspirations” (歌以言志). The expression develops from “reciting a *shi* poem to tell one’s aspirations” (賦詩言志), which can be traced further back to the ancient practice of reciting a *Shi jing* poem to express oneself in a diplomatic setting. Cao Cao claims the same social function for song verses, expressing his aspiration to transmit Lord Huan’s legacy.

Seasons of Life

Cao Cao’s “Striding Out of the Spacious Gate” is a song verse that has not been considered in a roaming-into-transcendence context, for it does not mention transcendental figures (such as Master Red Pine, Prince Qiao, and the Queen Mother of the West), places (such as Mount Kunlun and the Penglai Island), or vehicles (such as dragons and deer). Although the prelude (*yan* 豔) mentions clouds and rain, those have been read as favours from Heaven rather than transcendental vehicles. Mount Jieshi 碣石 from which one can look at the East Sea and search for the Penglai Island, is also mentioned, but it has been read as a landmark located on Cao Cao’s 207 CE military expedition against Yuan Shao’s 袁紹 (d. 202) two sons and the Wuhuan 烏桓 people. Therefore, when hesitance is mentioned (line 4), it has been associated with the dissenting opinions that Cao Cao’s military consultants held about the expedition, especially whether to launch it and which route to take.³²

In contrast to the above observations, we have seen earlier how Cao Cao integrates seemingly incongruous elements of transcendence arts, coffin-carrying songs, and his military expeditions into his song verse to respond to mortality. Such integration not only challenges our definitions of roaming-into-transcendence poems, but also suggests fluid approaches to mortality that Cao Cao shared with his military-political community. By placing

³¹ Wang, *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 27.1114.

³² Cao et al., *Cao Zijian shi zhu (wai san zhong)*, 228; de Crespigny, *Imperial Warlord*, 230–39.

Cao Cao's "Striding Out of the Spacious Gate" in this rich context, I would like to re-examine the prelude:³³

雲行兩步	With clouds I walk, with rain I stride,
超越九江之臯	Leaping over the swamp of the Nine Rivers,
臨觀異同	Looking on to what is different or similar.
4 心意懷游豫	Wavering and havoring in my mind,
不知當復何從	I do not know which I should follow.
經過至我碣石	Passing by my Mount Jieshi,
心惆悵我東海	I feel low and down by my East Sea.

(雲行至此為豔 From "With clouds I walk" to here is the prelude.)

The prelude would be difficult to understand if detached from the context of pursuing transcendence. The Nine Rivers (Jiujiang 九江) in line 2, for example, are not found on Cao Cao's 207 CE military expedition, but in Sima Xiangru's 司馬相如 (179–117 BCE) "Rhapsody on the Great Man" (Daren fu 大人賦). According to the *Shi ji* 史記, Emperor Wu of Han felt like he was floating in the air upon hearing about a transcendental journey:³⁴

徧覽八紘而觀四荒兮	Gazing all over at the Eight Bounds and viewing the Four Wastes—
竭度九江而越五河	He departs over the Nine Rivers and crosses the Five Waterways.

The Nine Rivers, we realize, exist in the realm of transcendence. The numbers eight, four, nine, and five are synonymous with "many" and "all." Just as the Eight Bounds and Four Wastes refer to all the places, so do the Nine Rivers (Jiujiang 九江) and Five Waterways (Wuhe 五河) refer to all the rivers south and north. In Sima Xianru's poetic performance, the great man owns the power to roam freely across the rivers. Accompanied by clouds and rain, the speaker in Cao Cao's song verse also transcends the limits, "Leaping over the swamp of the Nine Rivers, / Looking on to what is different or similar" (lines 2–3).

But when he arrives at Mount Jieshi, he hesitates: "Wavering and havoring in my mind, / I do not know which I should follow." In the next two lines, there is another expression that commentators fail to address, which I italicize in the translation below:

³³ *Song shu*, 21.619.

³⁴ *Shi ji*, 117.3063; Williams, *Chinese Poetry as Soul Summoning*, 88.

經過至我碣石 Passing by *my* Mount Jieshi,
 心惆悵我東海 I feel low and down by *my* East Sea.

In his commentary on Cao Cao's "Striding Out of the Spacious Gate," modern scholar Xia Chuancai 夏傳才 (1924–2017) takes *wo* 我 as a syllable filler, which completes the musical line rather than carries any substantial reference.³⁵ In my observation, the word is used as a possessive determiner "my." By calling the mountain and the sea "*my* Mount Jieshi" and "*my* East Sea," the speaker in Cao Cao's song verse identifies himself as a transcendent just as the speaker in Cao Zhi's does: "Mount Kunlun was originally *my* dwelling, / The central provinces are not *my* home" (崑崙本吾宅，中州非我家) in Cao Zhi's "Far Roaming" (Yuan you shi 遠遊詩, also known as Yuan you pian 遠遊篇); and "I don *my* cinnabar afterglow robe, / Put on *my* white rainbow skirt...I attach *my* belt pendants of carnelian and chalcedony, / Rinse the mouth with *my* broth of midnight mists" (披我丹霞衣，襲我素霓裳...帶我瓊瑤佩，漱我沆瀣漿) in Cao Zhi's "The Fifth Roaming" (Wu you yong 五遊詠).³⁶ Moreover, Mount Jieshi marks an entrance to the East Sea, where transcendents reside. By claiming both as "mine" but feeling dejected upon passing both, the speaker in Cao Cao's "Striding Out of the Spacious Gate" is not returning to his transcendental home.

The wavering and sinking heart in the prelude finds a path to follow in section 1 (again, *jie* 解 "section" is a musical term comparable to a "movement" in a concerto). By turning his back to the transcendental home and assuming the identity of a mortal, the speaker displays a totally different view of the East Sea. There is simplicity: the horizontal line of calm, full water and the vertically rising islands. There is life: the lush trees and grasses, and the breathing of the sea that can be observed in the souging wind and the surging waves. There is grandeur: so grand that the celestial bodies seem to rise from its weaves. "So fortunate, so perfect!" This is an exclamation of amazement at discovering a world, an exciting mortal world that has been overshadowed by the pursuit of transcendence. The expression "Let us sing to intonate our aspirations" appears at this point. What we aspire is no longer longevity but a fresh eye on life:

8	東臨碣石	Eastward I approach Mount Jieshi
	以觀滄海	To view the vast sea.
	水何淡淡	How calm and full the water is!
	山島竦峙	Mountainous islands rise aloft.

35 Cao, *Cao Cao ji zhu*, 18.

36 *Yiwen leiju*, 78.1332–33; *Yuefu shiji*, 64.922–23.

- 12 樹木叢生 Trees grow in thick clumps,
 百草豐茂 Grasses are lush and luxuriant.
 秋風蕭瑟 The autumn wind sighs and sighs,
 洪濤湧起 Overwhelming waves surge up.
- 16 日月之行 The sun and the moon move
 若出其中 As if rising from their midst.
 星漢粲爛 The starry Han River [i.e., Milky Way] glitters and glistens,
 若出其裏 As if rising from their inside.
- 20 幸甚至哉 So fortunate, so perfect!
 歌以詠志 Let us sing to intonate our aspirations.

(觀滄海 一解 “View the vast sea”: section 1)

Not only is the path Cao Cao decides to take in this song verse down to earth, it also evolves with seasons. The autumn wind that “soughs and sighs” on the East Sea in section 1 (line 14) turns into the winter wind that “loiters and lingers” in section 2 (line 23). In the onset of winter, some become more active than others. Birds are migrating while bears burrow into hibernation; merchants are travelling while farming tools are set aside:

- 孟冬十月 In the onset of winter, the tenth month,
 北風裴回 The north wind loiters and lingers.
- 24 天氣肅清 The air is quiet and cold,
 繁霜霏霏 Profuse frost falls and flurries.
 鷓鴣晨鳴 Great fowl call at dawn,
 鴻雁南飛 Swan-geese fly south.
- 28 鷙鳥潛藏 Birds of prey hide away,
 熊羆窟栖 Bears rest in their caves.
- 錢鏹停置 Spades and hoes are set aside,
 農收積場 The harvest is piled on the threshing floor.
- 32 逆旅整設 Inns are made ready,
 以通賈商 For merchants to travel.
- 幸甚至哉 So fortunate, so perfect!
 歌以詠志 Let us sing to intonate our aspirations.

(冬十月 二解 “In winter, the tenth month”: section 2)

The vibrant view of the migrating birds and travelling merchants further freezes into a still and barren landscape in section 3, where boats can hardly move, the earth can hardly be pierced, and people can hardly find peace of mind:

- | | | |
|----|------------------------------|--|
| 36 | 鄉土不同
河朔隆寒
流澌浮漂
舟船行難 | Each region is different:
North of the Yellow River is severely cold.
Floes of ice drift about,
Boats move with difficulty. |
| 40 | 錐不入地
蓴蕪深奧
水竭不流
冰堅可蹈 | Drills cannot pierce the earth,
Turnip and pearly everlasting grow deep.
Water dries up and stops flowing,
Ice is firm enough to walk on. |
| 44 | 士隱者貧
勇俠輕非
心常歎怨
戚戚多悲 | Men in seclusion are poor,
Bold outlaws do wrongs lightly.
In their hearts are constant complaints,
Sad, sad, so much sorrow. |
| 48 | 幸甚至哉
歌以詠志 | So fortunate, so perfect!
Let us sing to intonate our aspirations. |
- (河朔寒 三解 “North of the Yellow River is cold”: section 3)

On the one hand, the seasonal and landscape transitions correspond to Cao Cao's 207 CE military expedition. It was autumn when Cao Cao arrived at the East Sea coast, and winter when he returned from the frozen north. On the other hand, the transitions also correspond to the different stages of a mortal life. During the autumn and early winter of a mortal life, one enjoys grandeur (as in section 1) and tranquility (as in section 2). When it comes to the deep winter, there are various difficulties and immense sorrow (as in section 3). Even so, every section concludes with this celebratory expression: “So fortunate, so perfect!”

In his reading of this song verse, Paul W. Kroll observes: “[Cao’s] journey north was not the fabulous progress of a [Daoist], but it did bring him, the foremost lord of the State, to lands which seemingly appeared as strange and awful as those visited by a dream-wanderer.”³⁷ This reminds us that section 3 starts with this observation: “Each region is different.” The difference is both spatial and temporal. We might prefer the view of a threshing floor piled with harvest and inns packed with travellers, to the view of a fro-

37 Kroll, “Portraits of Ts’ao Ts’ao,” 93.

zen river and anxious people, but from a broader perspective, those are integral to the journey of life. Dark and heartbreaking as some moments might be, they are still marvellous.

This military expedition was the one during which Cao Cao lost his youngest and most brilliant consultant Guo Jia. Other military consultants, as Cao Cao noted in his letter to Xun You, were about the same age as Cao Cao. For this audience, in response to the north wind and frozen river in life, the speaker in this song verse does not immerse himself in deep sorrow as in the “Jing lie” and the second song verse by the title of “Qiu Hu xing.” Instead, in section 4 he passionately celebrates the unending aspirations with his fellow mortals. Between the soaring serpent and an aging steed that “aspires to run a thousand *li*,” he chooses the latter; between the long-lived tortoise and a mortal man with “a grand vision that never fades,” he also chooses the latter. Being pleased (*yi* 怡) and nourished (*yang* 養) by this feast and this song verse,³⁸ one may transcend the limits of lifespan. We can imagine that at this time, the host Cao Cao rises from his seat, inviting his guests to enjoy their journeys in the mortal world to the fullest. The indecisive and dejected figure in the prelude now dazzles the audience with his charisma:

神龜雖壽 猶有竟時	The sacred tortoise, though long-lived, Still comes to an end.
52 騰蛇乘霧 終為土灰	The soaring serpent, riding the mist, Eventually turns into dirt and ash.
驥老伏櫪 志在千里	A fine steed, aging, lying in the stable, ³⁹ Aspires to run a thousand <i>li</i> .
56 烈士暮年 壯心不已	A man of honour in his evening years Has a grand vision that never fades.
盈縮之期 不但在天	Our lifespan, full or shortened, Is not determined by Heaven alone.
60 養怡之福 可得永年	Blessed with nourishment and a pleasant heart, We can prolong our years.

38 The juxtaposition of *yi* 怡 and *yang* 養 can be found also in the concluding lines of an anonymous “Man ge xing” 滿歌行. See *Yuefu shiji*, 43.636–37.

39 Line 54 “A fine steed, aging, lying in the stable” (驥老伏櫪) is read alternatively—and perhaps more popularly—as “an aging fine steed lying in the stable” (老驥伏櫪), as we will see soon.

幸甚至哉 So fortunate, so perfect!
歌以詠志 Let us sing to intonate our aspirations.

(神龜雖壽 四解 “The sacred tortoise, though long-lived”: section 4)

The social and performative setting reconstructed above has been obscured by later uses of Cao Cao’s song verses. For example, the following lines from Cao Cao’s “Striding Out of the Spacious Gate” were passionately recited by the Eastern-Jin warlord Wang Dun 王敦 (266–324):

老驥伏櫪 An aging fine steed lying in the stable,
志在千里 Aspires to run a thousand *li*.
烈士暮年 A man of honour in his evening years
壯心不已 Has a grand vision that never fades.

According to *A New Account of the Tales of the World* (Shishuo xinyu 世說新語), a collection of distinctive speeches and deeds compiled under the sponsorship of Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–444), Wang Dun intonated the above lines whenever he drank, and beat time with his *ruyi* baton on a spittoon until “the mouth of the spittoon was completely in shards.”⁴⁰ Later, this anecdote is contextualized as Wang Dun’s ambition being oppressed by the emperor in his biography in the *Jin shu* 晉書.⁴¹

Su Shi’s 蘇軾 (1037–1101) “Rhapsody on the Red Cliff” (Chibi fu 赤壁賦) is another well-known example of using Cao Cao’s song verses in the context of frustration. It relates a moonlit night of the banished poet on the Yangtze River. At the Red Cliff, where he thought to be the ancient site of Cao Cao’s Battle of the Red Cliff, a “guest” persona played mournful tones on the flute and recited the following lines from Cao Cao’s “Short Song”:

月明星稀 The moon is bright, the stars are few,
烏鵲南飛 Crows and magpies are flying south.

“Are these not lines by Cao Mengde [style name of Cao Cao]?” said the guest. “He poured wine as he gazed across the river and composed poetry with his halberd lying across his lap. Without a doubt he was the greatest warrior of his age, and yet where is he today? And what about you and me, we fishermen and woodcutters of the river islets?”⁴² These quotations of Cao Cao’s

⁴⁰ Liu et al., *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, 13/4 (598); Liu et al., *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 13/4 (323).

⁴¹ *Jin shu*, 98.2557.

⁴² Su, *Su Shi wenji*, 1.5–6; Egan, *Word, Image, and Deed*, 223.

song verses, one by a general with unfulfilled aspirations and the other by a guest persona accompanying his banished friend, reinforce the long-held assumption that the poetry of loss is developed by those who were expelled from the court.

This chapter, on the other hand, reconstructs a social and performative setting in which transcendence arts, coffin-carrying songs, and military expeditions were integral to the poetic experience. We realize Cao Cao was not only another hero who perished. In his limited lifespan, he was also a charismatic host who presented sentimental songs at a feast to facilitate grief for the absent youth, and a warlord who adapted roaming-into-transcendence poetry to sustain his military-political community. Aging as they were, they chose to leave the transcendental home behind, singing and celebrating seasons of life with fellow mortals.