

EPILOGUE

SIX DECADES AGO, Hans H. Frankel proposed that the melancholy tone in Cao Zhi's 曹植 (192–232) poetry should be read as an artistic and noble mode of lyric poetry. The biographical approach that had been reducing everything to sibling rivalry was, accordingly, questioned and cast aside. This book demonstrates that poetry and biography are not either-or choices. Our understanding can be nuanced by cross-referencing the prefaces that the poets provided for their own poems, especially for their rhapsodies, and by reconstructing a cross-generic network of courtly texts. In this network, we can read the tumbleweed image in Cao Zhi's "*Shi* on the North Wind" (Shuofeng shi 朔風詩) not only as a poetic contrast to the vermilion blossoms in and out the poem, but also as a biographical contrast to a brilliant summer that he once enjoyed with his fellow poets, including his brother Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226).

On close examination, we find that Cao Zhi's frustration in sibling rivalry and Cao Pi's remembrance of their good old days have been more readily accepted because both fit the stereotype of a frustrated scholar-official. Like the ancient exile Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca. 340–278 BCE), Cao Pi and Cao Zhi at the post-epidemic court were both deprived of the conviviality of recognition, community, and life in the "centre" while experiencing the sorrow of frustration, solitude, and death at the "marginal." Cao Pi's nostalgic memories and Cao Zhi's melancholy expressions are two sides of the same coin. As discussed in Chapter 3, both are early medieval variations on ancient soul-summoning poetry, which is traditionally said to summon none other than the frustrated soul of Qu Yuan.

But by adopting a multidirectional approach, we can go beyond the traditional framework and uncover new inter-and-intra textual elements with which the poets negotiated between sorrow and community. In Chapter 1 they experienced aging, with a younger generation gone prematurely and the arts of transcendence out of reach. But by blending multiple poetic elements into his song verses, Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220) encouraged his fellow mortals to value their limited yet meaningful life. In Chapter 2 they experienced the death of a friend. The time of ritual mourning had already passed, but through their impersonation of the widow, Cao Pi and his fellow poets not only made the point that the pain of loss stayed with them as

it did with the bereaved woman, but also forged a bond among those who continued to remember the departed. In Chapter 4 we hear Cao Zhi, who was a frustrated scholar in Chapter 3, conversing with his frustrated friends in the role of a sympathetic prince. The marginal ones had long expected no listeners but their later readers, yet now their words of frustration were heard and addressed by a young lord. Finally in Chapter 5, while the world came undone for Cao Pi, Cao Zhi, and Cao Rui 曹叡 (204–239, r. 226–239) in their father/grandfather Cao Cao's death, the bereaved—whether they were inheriting offspring or not—sustained themselves and their community through poetry of emulation. A moment of loss is not necessarily a moment of isolation. By delving deeply into their poetry of loss, we see how writers at the Cao court employed their poetic art to establish, develop, and sustain a community in each difficult moment of their intertwined lives.