

# Health and Illness in the Paratext: Five Authorial Prefaces and a Letter from Early and Early Medieval China

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**ABSTRACT:** The authorial preface (*xu* 序) to an author's literary works became an important form of self-writing in early imperial and early medieval China. In this paper, I explore explicit illness narratives as well as oblique references to the author's physicality in prefatorial paratexts transmitted from the first century BCE to the sixth century CE, focusing on prefaces by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (to *Shi ji* 史記), Wang Chong 王充 (to *Lunheng* 論衡), Cao Pi 曹丕 (to *Dian lun* 典論), Ge Hong 葛洪 (to *Baopuzi* 抱朴子), and Xiao Yi 蕭繹 (to *Jinlouzi* 金樓子), as well as Sima Qian's letter to Ren An 任安. I read these authors' fragmentary "autopathographies" not as self-revelations per se, but as narratives that serve the overall rhetorical strategy of the preface in question. Examining these prefaces and their intertextual relations reveals a change in literary conventions regarding first-person illness narratives: it demonstrates the increasing acceptance of illness and physicality as part of an author's self-image and public persona and as subjects of refined literature (*wen* 文).

**Keywords:** autobiography, self-presentation, paratext, illness, identity

Several early and early medieval Chinese self-accounts (*zizhuan/xu* 自傳/序) that serve as authorial prefaces to collections of Masters literature (*zishu* 子書) include explicit and oblique references to their author's physicality. The self-narratives of health and illness in these prefaces do not resemble the fully-fledged illness memoirs that have been burgeoning world-wide since the rise of modernity. As early as in 1990, Wu Pei-Yi 吳百益 (1927–2009) called the general increase in self-

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writing “torrential,” and ten years later, Jeffrey K. Aronson diagnosed a “deluge” of autopathography–hyperbolae that fade in view of the exponential rise in autobiography and autopathography in the twenty-first century.<sup>①</sup> In our time, new biomedical technologies have blurred the boundaries of the individual, the human body, and life itself, leading to intense reflections on the relationship between human corporeality and identity. The easy availability of digital media for the publication of self-writings has contributed to the growth of pathography as well.<sup>②</sup> Contemporary culture has certainly moved beyond the marginalization of illness in autobiography that G. Thomas Couser diagnosed in the late twentieth century, and instead given full “cultural authorization” to self-narratives of illness.<sup>③</sup> Patient’s stories about struggles with all kinds of conditions that used to be concealed have come to form one aspect of the “confessional society” described by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman.<sup>④</sup>

Turning to early and early medieval China, we must be content with much more fragmented and dispersed self-representations of illness than those published nowadays. In this way, autobiography in ancient China is in line with that of other premodern cultures, where historical attitudes about public life and decorousness also often prevented that illness or impairment became part of self-presentations.<sup>⑤</sup> Despite their relative scarcity, early and early medieval Chinese self-accounts of health and illness nevertheless turn out to be highly symptomatic because, first, they point to an understanding of authorship as deeply rooted in the somatic, and second, they reveal the acceptance of illness and physicality as an element of an author’s public persona and as subjects of refined literature (*wen* 文).

One important feature of the fragmentary autopathographies under scrutiny here is that they are hardly revelations of the physical self per se, as we see them in twenty-first-century self-narratives of illness. They rather serve the overall rhetorical strategy of the preface in question, which in turn is closely connected to the book of Masters literature it concludes. As Xiaofei Tian has suggested, “the

① Wu, *The Confucian’s Progress: Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), xii; Aronson, “Autopathography: The Patient’s Tale,” *British Medical Journal* 321 (2000): 1600.

② See, e.g., Ann Jurecic, *Illness as Narrative* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 4–17; Johanna Emenev, *The Rise of Autobiographical Medical Poetry and the Medical Humanities* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2018), 11–46.

③ Couser, “Introduction: The Embodied Self,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 6.1 (1991): 1–2. Couser is credited with having coined the term “autopathography” in 1991, see his “Autopathography: Women, Illness, and Lifewriting,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 6.1 (1991): 66.

④ Bauman, *Consuming Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 3.

⑤ Early articles on autobiographical literature include Stephen W. Durrant’s “Self as the Intersection of Traditions: The Autobiographical Writings of Ssu–ma Ch’ien,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106 (1986): 33–40, and Stephen Owen’s “The Self’s Perfect Mirror: Poetry as Autobiography,” in *The Vitality of the Lyric Voice: Shih Poetry from the Late Han to the T’ang*, edited by Lin Shuen–fu and Stephen Owen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 71–85. Two book–length explorations were published in 1990, Wu Pei–yi’s *The Confucian’s Progress* and Wolfgang Bauer’s *Das Antlitz Chinas: Autobiographische Selbstdarstellungen in der chinesischen Literatur von ihren Anfängen bis heute* (Munich: Hanser, 1990).

larger work and the final self-account must be received as *one* package of the author's 'self,' as they are both essential for his sense of 'self' and for his self-representation."<sup>①</sup> Tian's assessment concurs with Gérard Genette's characterization of the authorial preface as "one of the instruments of authorial control," whose "most important function ... is to provide the author's interpretation of the text or, if you prefer, his statement of intent."<sup>②</sup>

Early medieval Chinese characterizations of the preface as a literary genre are brief. In *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍, they are not accorded a separate genre chapter, but only treated in connection with other subjects. Although Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 465–ca. 532) himself included a crucial "Statement of Intent" as Chapter 50 of his *Wenxin diaolong*, he did not mention self-accounts in his work at all.<sup>③</sup> Xiao Tong's 蕭統 (501–531) preface to his anthology *Selections of Refined Literature* (*Wen xuan* 文選) leaves out self-accounts too. The first Chinese author to treat the self-account in detail was Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (661–721), almost two centuries later, in his historiographical work *History Understood Thoroughly* (*Shitong* 史通). Liu evaluates past self-accounts mainly by their authors' descriptions of their ancestry, which he understands as expressions of filial duty. He also praises authors who recount events of their life from youth to adulthood, but advises against full disclosure and explicitly recommends the creative omission of personal weaknesses and unfavorable matters in one's family background.<sup>④</sup> Liu Zhiji's advice exposes the inherent ambivalence of autodiegetic narration: on the one hand, it operates with the notion of factuality and promises exclusive insight into the life and work of its author; on the other hand, it casts doubt on its own credibility because it relies on the author as the single source of authentication. This is compounded by "the suspicion of self-interest that surrounds the act of autobiography," as pointed out by Stephen Owen.<sup>⑤</sup> Far from deterring readers

① Tian, "The Twilight of the Masters: Masters Literature (*zishu*) in Early Medieval China," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 126 (2006): 470.

② Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 221–22.

③ On Liu Xie's "Xu zhi" 序志, see Antje Richter, "Empty Dreams and Other Omissions: Liu Xie's *Wenxin diaolong* Preface," *Asia Major* 25.1 (2012): 106–7.

④ "In an authorial preface it is appropriate to conceal one's shortcomings and to extol one's strengths. If something is not fallacious, it can be taken as a factual record. ... Speaking about one's family history in an authorial preface, the most important thing is to illuminate the reputation of one's parents. If there is no-one [to praise in one's family] one may omit this part" 然自敘之為義也, 苟能隱己之短, 稱其所長, 斯言不謬, 即為實錄 .... 夫自敘而言家世, 固當以揚名顯親為主, 苟無其人, 闕之可也. "Xuzhuan" 序傳, *Shitong tongshi* 史通通釋, comm. Pu Qilong 浦起龍 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), 32.257; trans. Bauer, *Antlitz Chinas*, 239–42; see also Matthew V. Wells, *To Die and Not Decay: Autobiography and the Pursuit of Immortality in Early China* (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 2009), 135–38.

⑤ Owen "The Self's Perfect Mirror," 74. On the inherent ambivalence of autodiegetic narration, also see Glauch and Philipowski, "Vorarbeiten zur Literaturgeschichte und Systematik vormodernen Ich-Erzählens," in *Von sich selbst*

of autobiography as literature, however, these ambivalences and suspicions appear to be important elements of the enduring fascination with self-narratives.

### *Sima Qian: Self-Writing the Damaged Body*

The first surviving authorial preface is Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 87 BCE) “Self-account of the Director of Archives” (“Taishigong zi xu” 太史公自序), transmitted as the last chapter of the *Records of the Historian* (*Shi ji* 史記).<sup>①</sup> Sima Qian devoted much of his self-account to his ancestors and in particular to his father, Sima Tan 司馬談 (d. 110 BCE). He quotes his father's treatise on the Six Schools and foregrounds his dedication to the historical work he was not able to finish during his lifetime. The father's deathbed instructions are at the center of the chapter, urging his son to continue his work and to make his name known to posterity as the most important part of his filial duties.<sup>②</sup> Sima Qian further emphasizes his contribution to the ancestral métier through extensive remarks on his own understanding of the historian's craft, especially towards the end of the preface.

Within the “Self-account of the Director of Archives” there are only slivers of what we today would call autobiographical information, not to mention a full-blown pathography. We know, nonetheless, that this text was written by someone who survived a drastic form of corporeal mutilation, the “palace punishment” of castration (*gongxing* 宮刑). Sima Qian endured this punishment for supposed *lèse-majesté* in 98 BCE, when “the Li Ling calamity happened to him” 太史公遭李陵之禍, as he himself wrote rather obliquely.<sup>③</sup> We can safely assume—but we surprisingly rarely do—that the physical injury inflicted on this occasion left him suffering from intense pain and discomfort for the rest of his days, and drastically shaped his outlook on life. None of this, however, appears in his preface. Instead of writing an autopathography, Sima Qian leaves it to his readers to deal with the subtext provided by their knowledge of his fate.

The harshest, if still rather vague, term he uses in this self-account to speak of the ills that have befallen him is *hui* 毀, “damaged, broken.” Speaking of himself, he uses the word *shen* 身, which can refer to the physical body proper as well as to one's self and even social status—and indeed, they all have been damaged, leaving him “no longer of use” 身毀不用矣. The ring of this statement is

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*erzählen: Historische Dimensionen des Ich-Erzählens* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2017), 50–51.

① *Shi ji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 130.3285–322; trans. Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien, Grand Historian of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 42–57. On Sima Qian's autobiographical writings see Durrant, “Self as the Intersection of Traditions.”

② “Making our name known to posterity in order to call attention to our parents, this is the greatest act of filial duty” 揚名於後世, 以顯父母, 此孝之大者. *Shi ji* 130.3295.

③ *Shi ji* 130.3300. For a summary of the Li Ling affair see Stephen W. Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian* (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), 8–10.

heightened by association with the misfortunes of other men Sima Qian brings to mind just after calling himself damaged. His list of fellow sufferers suggests a broad spectrum of adversity and evokes physical harm in more concrete terms, such as blindness and even another case of corporeal punishment, amputated feet. His list also creates a different, non-familial pedigree of historical exemplars who despite or perhaps even because of their suffering were able to leave indelible marks on the Chinese intellectual landscape: from King Wen of the Zhou dynasty 周文王 (fl. 11th c. BCE) to Confucius, Qu Yuan 屈原 (trad. 340–278 BCE), Zuo Qiuming, Sunzi 孫子 (trad. 544–496 BCE), Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (trad. 291–235 BCE), Han Fei 韓非 (ca. 280–233 BCE), and the creators of the *Odes*. Withholding the details of his damaged body from his readers, Sima Qian makes sure they remember it as the price he paid to complete the work bestowed upon him at his father's deathbed. In Genette's terms, this powerful strategy of authorial control serves the overall purpose to enhance the importance of the *Shi ji* and of Sima Qian's family.

Sima Qian's letter in reply to Ren An 任安 (d. ca. 91 BCE), first transmitted in the *Han shu* 漢書, serves that goal as well.<sup>①</sup> It also provides crucial background information that complements the self-account in the last chapter of the *Shi ji*, especially since the letter spells out what Sima Qian did not express explicitly in his preface: that he decided to forego suicide, the more honorable punishment, because he was determined to fulfil his father's wish to finish the *Shi ji*. Weighing two types of filial offense against each other—one being to render his physical body incomplete, the other to leave his family's body of work incomplete—Sima Qian chose personal over familial humiliation and thus paradoxically succeeded at associating his damaged body with the fundamental value of filial duty. This is no mean feat if we remember that filial children were expected to keep their bodies unharmed so that they would be able to return them at the end of their lives as they had received them from their ancestors. The expectation to preserve one's corporeal integrity is expressed in several canonical texts. The *Canon of Filial Duty* (*Xiaojing* 孝經) appears to describe Sima Qian's dilemma very well when it states, right in its first chapter, that “the beginning of filial duty” means that we must not dare to damage even the hair or skin of the body we have received from our parents, while the “end of filial duty” consists in establishing ourselves and making our name known to future generations to bring visibility to our parents.<sup>②</sup>

① “Bao Ren Shaoqing shu” 報任少卿書, *Han shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 62.2725–36; *Wen xuan* 41.1854–69; trans. Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien*, 57–67. The letter has been discussed and translated frequently, see also the recent book by Stephen Durrant, Wai-Yee Li, Michael Nylan, and Hans van Ess, *The Letter to Ren An and Sima Qian's Legacy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016).

② “Our body, limbs, hair, and skin are all received from our parents. Not daring to damage or harm them is the beginning of filial duty. Establishing ourselves and practicing the Way, and making our name known to posterity in order to call attention to our parents is the end of filial duty” 身體髮膚, 受之父母, 不敢毀傷, 孝之始也。立身行道,

The letter is not an autopathography either, but since it is all about the Li Ling affair, which led to Sima Qian's prosecution and eventual punishment, Sima Qian creates a much stronger subtext of physical damage and suffering. Not only does the list of suffering writers that figures so prominently in the preface appear in the letter as well, Sima Qian also lists a second group of historical figures who suffered various forms of legal punishment, including mutilation, and he emphasizes that none of these writers committed suicide. Addressing Ren An, Sima Qian speaks of himself as "mutilated and dwelling in impurity" 身殘處穢 and "a remnant of knife and saw" 刀鋸之餘, and depicts himself as someone whose "body is now missing a part" 大質已虧缺. He never describes the concrete physical after-effects of his punishment, but frequently evokes the mental anguish it keeps causing him. The closest we get to Sima Qian's physicality is when he recounts the manifestations of his shame: "It makes my gut churning all day long. At home, I feel confused as if something was slipping away from me, when I go out, I don't know where to turn. Whenever I remember this shame, my back is breaking into a sweat that soaks my clothes" 是以腸一日而九回, 居則忽忽若有所亡, 出則不知所如往. 每念斯恥, 汗未嘗不發背霑衣也. Sima Qian may not have written explicitly about the physical consequences of his mutilation, but his authorial voice is firmly rooted in his physical experience and he does not want his readers to forget about this. In the light of this realization, even the brief account of Sima Qian's travels as a young man in his authorial preface gains a dimension of physicality that is easily overlooked but functions as a powerful foil of intact health: we see him scrambling up mountains, crawling into caves, wading through rivers, handling bow and arrow.<sup>①</sup>

Two aspects stand out in this initial example of writing the ailing self: that we are not dealing with a simple case of illness, and that we see different genres yielding different kinds of autobiographical information. Let us approach the first aspect by asking how to describe the physical condition of Sima Qian. The writer of the self-account in chapter 130 of the *Shi ji* and of the letter to Ren An has in the past suffered a massive physical injury that was presumably lawfully inflicted upon him and left him, after a period of recovery, with permanent physical impairments, possibly also in pain and discomfort. Depending on how well he managed to adapt to his new situation, he may no longer feel ill at all times and to the eyes of others generally pass for healthy; he is, we are assured, back to demanding intellectual work and writing, and, as his letter mentions, apparently able to travel with the emperor without difficulties. It is nevertheless likely that he feels at least partly disabled, and his writings clearly demonstrate that he is painfully aware of the social perception of himself as an "invalid," which causes him additional suffering, both physical and psychological. The complex relationship between physical

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揚名於後世, 以顯父母, 孝之終也. *Xiaojing zhushu* 孝經注疏 1.7b, in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (1816), comp. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 2545.

① *Shi ji* 130.3293.

and social body in the case of Sima Qian thus exemplifies the difficulties of conceptualizing health and illness and it shows how closely intertwined illness, as a more temporary condition, and longterm impairment (or disability) can be.<sup>①</sup>

The second aspect, concerning the generic differences between Sima Qian's self-account and his autobiographical letter, leads us to notions of genre in the Chinese tradition and, in particular, to the realization how important Sima Qian was for the traditional understanding of self-accounts and personal letters, as shaped later on by Liu Xie and Liu Zhiji respectively. Liu Zhiji describes Sima Qian's self-account in the *Records of the Historian* as the ideal combination of two approaches: Qu Yuan's focus on his ancestors in his poem "Encountering Sorrow" ("Li sao" 離騷) and Sima Xiangru's focus on his own life in a self-account that has unfortunately not survived. Liu Zhiji praises Sima Xiangru for recounting his life from youth to adulthood, but criticizes him for writing with too little restraint. In Liu Zhiji's view, authors should, just as Sima Qian had done, rather suppress depictions of morally questionable matters, along with the flaws of oneself and one's ancestors as we have pointed out above.<sup>②</sup> The first detailed description of the historical development and overall capacity of letters is found in chapter 25 of Liu Xie's *Wenxin diaolong*. Although Liu Xie mentions Sima Qian's letter to Ren An only once explicitly, praising it for its "expansive intent and thrust" and "distinct hue," the letter appears to have played a key role for Liu Xie's general assessment of letters. Liu writes that "the epistolary genre, both in detail and in general, is rooted in the full capture of words. Words are meant to dispel pent-up emotions and to carry demeanor."<sup>③</sup> Not only does Liu Xie's "full capture of words" connote the "full capture of meaning" 盡意 evoked (and denied) at the end of Sima Qian's letter, Liu's characterization of correspondence as a means to release pent-up emotions further recalls two moments in Sima Qian's letter that are inspired by Qu Yuan: the lament that he feels "depressed and stifled with no one to talk to" 抑鬱而無誰語, and the description of his fellow sufferers as men who "all had something that was pent up in their minds" 皆意有所鬱結. Ban Gu 班固 (32–92), who quotes the letter to Ren An in his biography of Sima Qian in the *History of the Han Dynasty*, intensifies this connection by extending the allusion to Qu Yuan and concluding that Sima Qian's letter is trustworthy

① Recent scholarship on health and illness is introduced in Havi Carel and Rachel Cooper, eds., *Health, Illness, and Disease: Philosophical Essays* (London: Routledge, 2014). See also Bjørn Hofmann, "Disease, Illness, and Sickness," and Daniel M. Hausman, "Health and Well-Being," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Medicine*, ed. Miriam Solomon, Jeremy R. Simon, and Harold Kincaid (New York: Routledge, 2017), 16–35.

② *Shitong tongshi* 32.257.

③ 志氣槃桓，各含殊采... 詳總書體，本在盡言，言以散鬱陶，託風采。 *Wenxin diaolong zhu* 文心雕龍註，comp. Fan Wenlan 范文瀾 (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1958), 25.446. For an analysis of this chapter, see Antje Richter, *Letters and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 49–62.

because he “vented his grievances from the dark” 幽而發憤，書亦信矣。<sup>①</sup> The resulting paradigm of the decorous and restrained preface on the one hand and the more expressive and authentic letter on the other hand has not always been helpful in furthering a deeper understanding of Chinese epistolary literature.

Sima Qian’s role in Chinese literature has often been described in foundational terms, as the father of Chinese historiography, autobiography, and epistolary literature, and as “the central figure in the formation of authorship in China.”<sup>②</sup> Knowing that he has also made it socially acceptable to write the damaged body in historical and epistolary genres by likening himself to historical exemplars and emphasizing his filial duty, we also have to credit Sima Qian with the establishment of self-writing that allows an author to emerge as a decidedly embodied and, for that matter, even physically damaged being.

### *Wang Chong: Innate Vigor and Ageing*

About two centuries later, another author made room for his body in his autobiography, Wang Chong 王充 (27–ca. 100 CE) in the chapter “Records about Myself” (“Zi ji” 自紀), which is part of his massive collection of essays, *Discourses Weighed in the Balance* (*Lunheng* 論衡).<sup>③</sup> His self-account overall resembles that of Sima Qian in its focus on the author’s intellectual and moral life as it relates to his oeuvre, but Wang Chong takes a radically different approach to his ancestry, which would eventually earn him Liu Zhiji’s disapproval. Wang also includes more elements of what we would understand as life-writing today, for instance the first somewhat detailed report of a childhood in Chinese literature.<sup>④</sup> In another departure from Sima Qian’s precedent, Wang depicts himself as an outstanding scholar and individual throughout this chapter, using a multitude of highly original comparisons in an openly self-congratulatory way. Fittingly, he does not mention any illnesses or complaints at all when he writes about his adolescence and adulthood. His physical body only appears toward the end of the self-account, where Wang Chong writes about his old age, a time when a certain physical decline would have been excused. Interestingly, this is the only part of his self-account where he uses the humble self-designation *yu* 愚 (“this ignorant, untaught person”):

In the third year of the Zhanghe era [89 CE], I resigned from my provincial [office in Yangzhou] to stay at

① *Han shu* 62.2738.

② Owen, *The Making of Early Chinese Classical Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 214.

③ *Lunheng jiaoshi* 論衡校釋, comm. Huang Hui 黃暉 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 85.1187–1210; trans. Alfred Forke, *Lun-hêng* (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1907 and 1911), 1: 64–82.

④ As pointed out by Wolfgang Bauer, see *Antlitz Chinas*, 113.

home. Since I was approaching seventy, it was time to go into retirement. My official career was completely over, and my resolve spent as never before. Things did not go well, and my health declined. My hair turned grey, my teeth fell out, and I became older every day. Friends of my generation became ever scarcer, and there were few people on whom I could rely. I was poor without the means to support myself properly, and I was unhappy in my mind. Time gently went by and I approached the period of *geng* and *xin*.<sup>①</sup> Although I had feared that my end was near, I found myself still brimming [with energy]. Thus I wrote the book *Nurturing Inborn Nature* in sixteen chapters, [covering topics such as] nurturing the vital breath to safeguard oneself, adjusting one's food and drink, closing one's eyes and ears, using one's vital essence sparingly to preserve oneself, and, if suitable, supporting oneself with medicine and physical exercises.<sup>②</sup> Many hope to prolong their life and to postpone old age for a while. But once our time is up, there is no way back and only our books are left to posterity. Truly, human life is of a certain length, and there is a time to live and a time to die for humans just as for animals.

章和三年，罷州家居。年漸七十，時可懸輿。仕路隔絕，志窮無如。事有否然，身有利害。髮白齒落，日月踰邁。儔倫彌索，鮮所恃賴。貧無供養，志不娛快。曆數冉冉，庚辛域際，雖懼終徂，愚猶沛沛，乃作養性之書凡十六篇。養氣自守，適食則酒，閉明塞聰，愛精自保，適輔服藥引導，庶冀性命可延，斯須不老。既晚無還，垂書示後。惟人性命，長短有期，人亦蟲物，生死一時。<sup>③</sup>

Wang Chong describes the effects of old age on his body in forthright if formulaic terms. It is possible, though, that he was not so much driven by the wish to represent his physical decline truthfully but rather by rhetorical motives. Especially since the appeal to a writer's personal experience is an important concern throughout *Lunheng*, his own failing but then remarkably restored health in old age may have helped him to establish legitimacy as the author of a book on nurturing vitality. A second reason to evoke his decline so vividly could have been that Wang wanted to set up a striking backdrop for yet another outburst of his scholarly creativity and intellectual vigor, qualities that formed an essential part of Wang's authorial identity as it emerges in *Lunheng* as a whole. Regardless of how calculating Wang might have been in his rhetoric in this instance, it remains a strong move to close

① The interpretation of the phrase "*geng* and *xin*" is uncertain. It is unlikely that it refers to actual years, though. Understanding it figuratively to refer to the years of impending death seems more convincing: Wang Chong, who believed his end to be near, unexpectedly recovered and found himself well enough to write another book. In the chapter "Evaluation of Ghosts" ("Ding gui" 訂鬼), Wang Chong uses the phrase "the spirit of *geng* and *xin*" 庚辛之神 in the sense of "the spirit of death" (*Lunheng jiaoshi* 22.936).

② Readers have interpreted the passage following "養氣自守" differently: either as a description of the contents of the book—as in my translation—or as a catalogue of Wang's longevity practices, as, for instance, in Alfred Forke's (1867–1944) translation *Lun-hêng*, 1:82. There is no actual contradiction between these interpretations, since Wang probably wrote about what he practiced.

③ *Lunheng jiaoshi* 85.1208–10.

an autobiographical account not just with a perfunctory nod to the transitoriness of life, but with an evocation of one's inevitable physical decline as a human animal.<sup>①</sup>

Where Sima Qian's mutilated body rises from the subtext of his preface to emphasize the grandeur of the *Shi ji* and the Sima family—which, we are to assume, are worth any personal sacrifice—Wang Chong's ageing body, although subject to “nature's changing course,” is beholden to none but himself. Wang declared his independence from his family early on in his self-account, claiming that he compared only to “the bird without a pedigree: the phoenix; or the beast without a species: the unicorn; or the man without an ancestry: the Sage; or the object without a counterpart: the treasure.”<sup>②</sup> Wang closes this argument in favor of his own singularity with the assertion that ancestry is no guarantee for scholarly success and that it needs a surplus of original *qi* 元氣 to make someone a writer of literature.

It is not a coincidence that Wang Chong, who so clearly conceives of himself as a singular individual, also confidently writes about himself as a physical being and about writing as intellectual work that is rooted in one's individual *qi*.<sup>③</sup>

### *Cao Pi: Self-Portrait of the Crown Prince as an Athlete and Warrior*

Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226), who ruled as Emperor Wen of the Wei dynasty (魏文帝) from 220 to 226, would certainly have agreed with Wang Chong on that point, as we know from his “Discourse on Literature” (“Lun wen” 論文), where he asserted that “literature is dominated by the vital breath” 文以氣為主.<sup>④</sup> The “Discourse on Literature” was part of Cao Pi's *Classical Discourses* (*Dian lun* 典論), a collection of essays that has only been preserved in excerpts. The self-account (“Zi xu” 自敘) attached to the *Classical Discourses* has not survived in its entirety either. Given its fragmentary character, it is difficult to tell if the extant parts of this preface are representative of the text as a whole or give a skewed impression.<sup>⑤</sup>

Going by what survives of his self-account, Cao Pi reports no illnesses whatsoever; on the contrary, he extensively details his excellent health and manifold physical accomplishments. Accounts

① For another instance of pointing out how close humans and animals are see chapter 49 (“Shang/Shi chong” 商 / 適蟲), dedicated to insects, especially *Lunheng jiaoshi* 49.716.

② 鳥無世鳳皇，獸無種麒麟，人無祖聖賢，物無常嘉珍 ... 更稟於元，故能著文。 *Lunheng jiaoshi* 85.1206–7.

③ Wang Chong anticipates arguments presented by Cao Pi in his “Discourse on Literature” in favor of the individuality of writers; see, e.g., *Lunheng jiaoshi* 85.120.

④ *Wen xuan* 52.2271.

⑤ Cao Pi's self-account is preserved in Pei Songzhi's 裴松之 (372–451) commentary to *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959) 2.89 and, in a slightly longer version, in *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960) 93.8b–9a; see also the translation by Wells, *To Die and Not Decay*, 129–33. My quotations from his self-account are all based on the version in Pei Songzhi's commentary.

of his athletic abilities clearly outshine what he writes about his literary work. He describes learning riding and archery as a young boy, and how he escaped on horseback during a military operation when he was just ten years old. He insists not only that he still possesses the archery and riding skills he acquired in childhood, but also that he is becoming physically stronger all the time without ever getting tired of these physical activities (少好弓馬,于今不衰....日多體健,心每不厭). The self-account also includes a series of situations that show Cao Pi in conversation and competition with highly skilled opponents, although none of them proves to be his match in the end. In these vividly told anecdotes Cao Pi openly boasts of his physical superiority and even incorporates the applause he received from admiring bystanders into his narrative. When Xun Yu 荀彧 (163–212), one of his father’s military advisors, politely compliments Cao Pi on his reputation as an archer, this young man in his early twenties does not respond by expressing thanks for a senior’s good opinion of himself, but uses the opportunity to paint a yet more impressive picture of his archery skills. At one point, Cao Pi almost surprises us when he writes that one should not present oneself as preeminent in anything (夫事不可自謂己長), as he himself might have done before he met his esteemed martial arts teacher Yuan Min 袁敏. But then he turns out to stay true to the persona he has created in this text so far because it was Yuan Min who helped him become the virtuoso he is now. The passage mainly serves the rhetorical function to transition from one type of athletic feat to the next.

Liu Zhiji criticizes self-aggrandizement in self-accounts, quoting a memorial written by Cao Pi’s younger brother and rival, Cao Zhi 曹植 (192–232), who wrote that “it is shameful for a man to flaunt himself and for a woman to act as her own matchmaker” 夫自衒自媒者,士女之醜行也.<sup>①</sup> This choice of allusion may not be a coincidence, because Cao Pi leads the list of writers Liu Zhiji identifies as culpable of self-praise. Although Liu’s criticism that certain writers would always conduct a full analysis of anything good they perceive about themselves or spell out in great detail the slightest skill they might possess fits Cao Pi’s approach rather well, his lively and colorful account adds a great deal to our understanding of physical exercise and competition in early medieval China.

We have mentioned that Cao Pi’s self-account may not be complete—at a length of approximately one-thousand characters the transmitted text is less than quarter of the autobiographical prefaces by Wang Chong and Ge Hong. As it stands now, it harmonizes with the focus on the physical that we know from Cao Pi’s “Discourse on Literature” (“Lun wen” 論文), which claims that an author’s vital breath or *qi* determines their literary production and emphasizes the perishability of the physical body.<sup>②</sup> The first time that Cao Pi emerges as a writer is toward the end of his self-account, when he singles out

① *Shitong tongshi* 32.6b. For the text of Cao Zhi’s “Memorial Seeking to Prove Myself” (“Qiu zi shi biao” 求自試表), see *Wen xuan* 37.1675–84.

② *Wen xuan* 52.2271–72.

pellet chess as the only game he enjoys and excels at, and when he mentions in passing that he wrote a rhapsody about the game when he was young. Not more than the last tenth of the extant text of the self-account deals with literary matters, and half of that is dedicated to the learnedness of Cao Pi's father, Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220). In it, Cao Pi emphasizes that his father continued to read as an adult and “would always be found with a book in his hand, even when he was with the troops” 雖在軍旅, 手不釋卷. He also tells us that his father saw this as a personal distinction that set him apart from the crowd whose ability to learn declined with age. Although Cao Pi also refers to other relatives, he does not broach the subject of his ancestry, perhaps to avoid discussing his grandfather's background as the adopted son of a eunuch. It is possible that this omission inspired Liu Zhiji's recommendation to pass over one's forebears in a self-account if there is no-one to praise in one's family.

Cao Pi is clearly concerned with the balance of *wen* 文, which is mostly associated with activities of the mind, and *wu* 武, which has a strong physical side. Cao Pi says so explicitly early on in his self-account when he asserts that the civil or literary way and the martial way each have their time (夫文武之道, 各隨時而用). Rhetorically speaking, Cao Pi's emphasis on his health and physical fitness may have been intended to prove himself as fully “martial” and thus prepared for the throne: that he shows that in a celebrated piece of literature is part of the appeal. We neither know when Cao Pi finished his *Classical Discourses* nor when he wrote the preface to that work, but the specific kind of self-praise he employed and the way he praised Cao Cao as his teacher and model throughout the text could indicate that his self-account was meant to impress a living father, who may still have been wavering about whom to make his successor, Cao Pi or Cao Zhi (whose name does not come up once in the extant version of Cao Pi's self-account). Cao Pi died of what appears to have been an acute illness before he was forty. Regrettably, Cao Pi did not leave us any compositions about his last illness, nor do the historical sources provide details about his early death. His official biography just mentioned a “serious illness” 疾篤.<sup>①</sup>

### *Ge Hong: Physical Defects as Emblems of Distinction*

For different reasons, none of the writers we have discussed so far has describes himself as ill in the narrow sense of the word: Sima Qian acknowledges his impairment but writes from a position of someone who obviously successfully adapted to his altered physicality; Wang Chong admits to declining health in old age but emphasizes that his scholarly creativity is still going strong; Cao Pi characterizes himself as exceptionally athletic and, we are to imply, bursting with health, without suffering from illness or any other physical weaknesses. The first writer of a self-account who presents

<sup>①</sup> *Sanguo zhi* 2.86.

himself as ill and ill-favored is Ge Hong 葛洪 (ca. 283–343) in the “Account of Myself” (“Zi xu” 自敘), a long autobiographical preface added to the forty-nine *Outer Chapters* (*Waipian* 外篇) of *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (*Baopuzi* 抱樸子).<sup>①</sup> The *Outer Chapters* discuss matters of governance and morality and, in Ge Hong’s own words, “belong to the Confucian tradition” 屬儒家. The *Outer Chapters* have received less interest than Ge’s twenty *Inner Chapters* (*Neipian* 內篇), which “belong to the Daoist tradition” 屬道家 and are dedicated to a defense of the reality of transcendence, or immortality (*xian* 仙), and to the propagation of methods to achieve this state.<sup>②</sup> The limited information we have about Ge Hong’s life suggests that he was a prolific writer with broad scholarly interests and substantial experience in military and minor civil posts in different parts of southern China.<sup>③</sup>

Although Ge Hong has come to be mostly identified with the *Inner Chapters* of his *Baopuzi*, this part of his scholarly and religious persona remains in the background of his “Account of Myself.” Conforming with the model set by Sima Qian—a model he never mentions, though—Ge Hong starts with a description of his family history, but he is swifter than his predecessor in moving on to the subject of his own life. Despite his aristocratic background and unmistakable southern pride, Ge characterizes his youth and education as socially and geographically disadvantaged. Living in relative poverty in the years after the early death of his father and growing up in the south, at the periphery of the culturally dominant north, Ge was aware that his access to the cultural productions of the north was incomplete:

[The Han dynasty book catalogues] “Categorized Register and “Monograph on Arts and Letters list 13,299 scrolls in all. But since the beginning of the Wei dynasty [220–266], the various kinds of literature have been proliferating and there are now several times as many books than in the past. So I knew myself that the books I had not yet seen were many. Because not all books were available south of the Yangtze River, in the past I wanted to visit the capital [Luoyang] to search for rare books. I happened to run into some great unrest, though, and had to return when I was not yet halfway there, which I have often regretted. Now that I am approaching the age of “not being confused” and my old intentions are declining and crumbling, I only hope to “get

① *Baopuzi waipian jiaojian* 抱樸子外篇校箋, comp. Yang Mingzhao 楊明照 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 50.644–721; see also the translations by Jay Sailey, *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity: A Study of the Philosopher Ko Hung, A.D. 283–343* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1978), 241–72 and James R. Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine, Religion in the China of A.D. 320: The Nei P’ien of Ko Hung (Pao-p’u tzu)* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), 6–21; as well as the analysis in Wells, *To Die and Not Decay*.

② *Baopuzi waipian jiaojian* 50.665–66.

③ See his biography in *Jin shu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 72.1911–14. Of the extant works ascribed to Ge Hong, only *Shenxian zhuan* 神仙傳 (*Traditions of Divine Transcendents*) and *Zhouhou beijifang* 肘後備急方 (*Formulas to Keep Up One’s Sleeve in Preparation of Emergencies*) may actually have been written by him.

diminished and diminished again, pursuing no pursuits,”<sup>①</sup> and to live out my days plowing my land deep in the countryside. At this time, wide-ranging scholarship has already come to an end for me.

案別錄、藝文志，衆有萬三千二百九十九卷。而魏代以來，群文滋長，倍於往者。乃自知所未見之多也。江表書籍，通同不具。昔欲詣京師索奇異，而正值大亂，半道而還，每自嘆恨。今齒近不惑，素志衰積，但念損之又損，為乎無為，偶耕藪澤，苟存性命耳。博涉之業，於是日沮矣。<sup>②</sup>

This passage is not only rich in implications for Chinese book history, but Ge Hong also provides another instance of thinking about one’s intellectual life in terms of age. We could interpret the passage as Ge Hong saying a voluntary farewell to classical learning at forty, the age when Confucius, in his epigrammatic autobiography in the *Analects*, described himself as no longer confused. This interpretation appears especially apt since Ge rejects devotion to learning in favor of devotion to the *dao* in words taken from the *Daodejing*, ingeniously combining allusions to central texts of the Confucian and the Daoist tradition. In light of the discourse about the decline of everyone’s vital breath throughout one’s life and its influence on certain of one’s intellectual powers that we mentioned above, Ge Hong’s change of path in midlife could also have had another reason: Ge, now in his late thirties, no longer believed that he could cope with the amount of reading that would be necessary to excel in classical learning and thus decided to focus on the Daoist arts of longevity instead.

Ge Hong continues by describing himself as wanting in natural endowments, which he presents as a mix of physical and mental defects: “as a person, I am slow-witted and rustic; I am dull of mind and halting of speech, and my appearance is disagreeable” 洪之為人也而駮野，性鈍口訥，形貌醜陋。<sup>③</sup> With each of these imperfections, however, Ge Hong associates himself with historical figures who were traditionally described as also lacking in quick-wittedness, verbal facility, and good looks, but had nevertheless shown themselves to be intellectually and morally superior.<sup>④</sup> To single out the speech impediment that Ge Hong mentions: by claiming to be “halting of speech,” he implicitly joins an illustrious group of stutterers that includes such eminent literati as Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BCE–18 CE), Guo Pu 郭璞 (276–324), and Zuo Si 左思 (ca. 250–ca. 305).<sup>⑤</sup> Complementing his

① The sentence combines allusions to *Lunyu* 論語 2.4: “At forty, I was no longer confused” 四十而不惑, and *Laozi Daodejing* 老子道德經 48.192: “If you pursue learning you grow day by day, if you pursue the Way you diminish day by day. By getting diminished and diminished again, you get to the point of having no pursuits. Having no pursuits, there is nothing that is not pursued” 為學日益，為道日損，損之又損之，以至於無為，無為無不為。See *Shisanjing zhushu*, 2461; *Laozi jiaoshi* 老子校釋, comp. Zhu Qianzhi 朱謙之 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 192.

② *Baopuzi waipian jiaojian* 50.660.

③ *Baopuzi waipian jiaojian* 50.662.

④ In Zuo Si’s biography, ugliness and stuttering (貌寢, 口訥) are also mentioned together; see *Jin shu* 92.2376.

⑤ Mark G. Pitner has suggested a “strong link ... between disfluency and the perceived moral potency of those

natural disadvantages, Ge Hong adds that he does not care for fashionable or even clean clothes either. Notably, these and other elements of his autobiography also make occasional appearances in the chapters of *Baopuzi* itself. The interconnectedness of the authorial preface with the main chapters is also emphasized by passages in the main chapters of *Baopuzi* that are decidedly autobiographical in character themselves and supply additional information not mentioned in the preface.<sup>①</sup>

Explaining that his aversion to small talk gave rise to his sobriquet “The Master Who Embraces Simplicity,” which he himself then embraced and used to title his two collections, Ge Hong adds another detail about his physicality, claiming that he “was infirm and frail by nature and also often sick” 洪秉性尪羸，兼之多疾。<sup>②</sup> After a passage on his contentment with poverty and his aversion to mindless social intercourse, Ge also brings up the effects of persistent ill health on his mood and social practices, continuing to refer to himself by his personal name, Hong:

When it comes to offering my condolences after the death of someone’s parent or paying sickbed visits, then I want to overcome my aversion [to social interaction] with all my heart, and I feel that it is quite out of the question that I do not go. But being sick and of poor health myself, I usually don’t manage. Whenever my critics blame me for that, I admit my fault, but I do not take their criticism to heart. The only reason I am not feeling ashamed for myself is that I am all intent [on making these visits], but then my illness thwarts my desires.

至於弔大喪，省困疾，乃心欲自勉強，令無不必至，而居疾少健，恒復不周，每見譏責於論者，洪引咎而不恤也。意苟無餘，而病使心違，顧不媿己而已。<sup>③</sup>

Ge Hong describes what must be a universal experience: being unwell makes him cranky, which in turn makes him disinclined to fulfil his social and ritual obligations, among them the duty to visit the sick and the bereaved. It is remarkable that Ge does not blame his reluctance to socialize on illness alone as the most broadly recognized “objective” reason to escape one’s responsibilities. He instead complicates the picture by introducing intermediate psychological steps, thus creating a fuller image of himself as an individual human being and achieving greater authenticity. (Incidentally, this passage is one of many examples in early medieval literature in which the words *ji* 疾 and *bing* 病 are used

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suffering from it.” Pitner, “Stuttered Speech and Moral Intent: Disability and Elite Identity Construction in Early Imperial China,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 137 (2017): 699.

① On Ge Hong’s rejection of fashionable clothes, see, e.g., *Baopuzi waipian jiaojian* 26.11; chapter 19, “The Long View” (“Xia lan” 遐覽) of *Baopuzi neipian* is a good example for a chapter with autobiographical information; *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi* 抱朴子外篇校釋, comp. Wang Ming 王明 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 19.303–10.

② *Baopuzi waipian jiaojian* 50.664.

③ *Baopuzi waipian jiaojian* 50.665–66.

interchangeably.) Dwelling on his restraint in social interaction, Ge declares that he is overcritical when it comes to forming friendships, while also mentioning a network of friends who help out when he is “short of food or urgently needs to prepare a medical concoction” 至於糧用窮匱，急合湯藥，則喚求朋類。<sup>①</sup>

After this detailed characterization of his personality, Ge Hong returns to major events of his adult life, especially his involvement with military campaigns between 303 and 306, his decision to resign from office, his literary activities, and the contents of the two parts of his *Baopuzi*. Toward the end of his preface, Ge Hong explicitly refers to previous self-accounts, among them those of Wang Chong and Cao Pi, which apparently circulated among educated readers. It is all the more surprising that Ge mentions neither Sima Qian’s preface nor his letter, although he does express admiration for the historian in the *Inner Chapters*.<sup>②</sup> Remarking on Cao Pi’s tendency to brag (just as Liu Zhiji would, four hundred years later), Ge Hong offers a mocking response: a long list of things he, Ge, is not good at—a list that, however, soon turns into a brag about his own martial prowess.<sup>③</sup>

Ge Hong’s emphasis of his physical deficiencies, unappealing looks, and rejection of social graces is rhetorically complex. They tap into a rich reservoir of Confucian biographical motifs, apparently befitting a self-account to the *Outer Chapters* of his *Baopuzi*. Together they can be read as his attempt to construct an image of sincerity and profundity to set himself apart from what he declares to be the superficial zeitgeist. In fashioning this persona of an erudite nonconformist, Ge Hong, who in this preface calls himself “the least of the Confucians” 儒者之末，<sup>④</sup> also draws on Daoist traditions, evoking the physically impaired but flourishing figures we know from the *Zhuangzi*, such as Zhili Shu 支離疏 and Shushan Wuzhi 叔山無趾。<sup>⑤</sup> In the much shorter “Preface” (“Xu” 序) to the *Inner Chapters* of the *Baopuzi*, Ge reaffirms this stance when he compares his strength to that of a fly, his strategies to that of a limping turtle, his looks to that of the famously ill-favored wife of the Yellow Emperor, and his assets to sand and gravel.<sup>⑥</sup> Flaunting this outwardly gauche and deficient persona, Ge

① *Baopuzi waipian jiaojian* 50.670.

② See the chapter “Illuminating the Root” (“Ming ben” 明本) in *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi* 10.167–68.

③ *Baopuzi waipian jiaojian* 50.702.

④ *Baopuzi waipian jiaojian* 50.666.

⑤ *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, comp. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 and Wang Xiaoyu 王孝魚 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), 4.180 and 5.202. See also Albert Galvany and Romain Graziani, “Legal Mutilation and Moral Exclusion: Disputations on Integrity and Deformity in Early China,” *T’oung Pao* 106 (2020): 34–54.

⑥ “How could I dare, having the strength of a fly, to dream of undertakings such as surging up to the sky? Or, whipping a limping turtle, to follow in the tracks of [the legendary steed] ‘Flying Rabbit’? Or, with the ugliness of a dressed up Momu, to seek charming conversation in pursuit of a mate? Or, pushing worthless sand and gravel, demand a thousand pieces of gold at [the legendary jade expert Bian] He’s shop?” 豈敢力蒼蠅而慕沖天之舉，策跛鼈而追飛兔之軌，飾嫫母之陋醜求媒揚之美談，推沙礫之賤質，索千金於和肆哉？*Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi*, 336.

may have pursued a twofold goal, appropriate to the two parts of his work: to justify his unsatisfactory official career and to legitimize his expertise in alchemy, pharmacology, and other longevity techniques that are described in the *Inner Chapters*.<sup>①</sup>

### *Xiao Yi: Coming to Terms with Illness and Impairment*

Another fragmentarily preserved authorial preface (“Zi xu” 自序) written by a future emperor makes room for the author’s body: the last chapter in Xiao Yi’s 蕭繹 (508–555) work *Master of the Golden Tower* (*Jinlouzi* 金樓子).<sup>②</sup> Xiao Yi, who briefly ruled as Emperor Yuan of the Liang dynasty (梁元帝, r. 552–554), may today be best known as the passionate book collector who in 554 set his enormous library on fire so that it would not fall into the hands of the Western Wei troops led by Yuwen Tai 宇文泰 (507–556). The fire must have caused momentous loss to the Chinese literary heritage, whether Xiao Yi was indeed personally responsible for the conflagration or not.<sup>③</sup> Xiao Yi spent much of his life working on his magnum opus *Jinlouzi*, which he finished a year before his death at the hands of the Western Wei. The book is only fragmentarily transmitted, but even in its present form *Jinlouzi* is a voluminous collection of writings on diverse topics that is still awaiting full discovery.

Unlike Cao Pi, Xiao Yi does not boast about his physical fitness. Instead, he recalls the early onset of detrimental maladies that were to stay with him for the rest of his life. Living with illness from an early age may have been the reason why Xiao Yi chose not to close his preface with reflections on the transitoriness of life, as Wang Chong did, but rather to commence it with this notion. Life being as fleeting as it is, “how could I not write a self-account” 豈可不自序也?<sup>④</sup> This sentiment betrays Xiao Yi’s understanding of autobiographical prefaces as an antidote to mortality and an important contribution to the author’s historical reputation. Although the author Xiao Yi also appears elsewhere in *Jinlouzi*, he may well have conceived of this chapter—dedicated to his own intellectual development—as a particularly effective imprint of himself.

Again unlike Cao Pi, Xiao Yi focuses on his literary activities. He writes that he started composing

① There are many indications that Ge Hong felt close to Wang Chong: he defended Wang against critics complaining about the length of his texts (*Baopuzi waipian jiaojian* 43.423–26); he argued for breadth of learning (32.98–120); he resumed and developed Wang’s argument that generations are equal (30.65–78); and so on.

② *Jinlouzi jiaojian* 金樓子校箋, comp. Xu Yimin 許逸民 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 14.1343–69. Beatrice Spade’s translation of the self-account is only partly convincing, see her “The Life and Scholarship of Emperor Yuan (508–555) of the Liang as Seen in the *Chin-lou-tzu*” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1981), 26–31. See also Tian, “Twilight of the Masters,” 478–85.

③ On the events surrounding the loss of the Liang library and a historiographical analysis of the records about it, see Glen Dudbridge, *Lost Books of Medieval China* (London: British Library, 2000), 38–44.

④ *Jinlouzi jiaojian* 14.1343–44.

poetry as a young boy of five, and he compares his wide reading as a teenager with that of Ge Hong, whose self-account he quotes. He also quotes Cao Pi's self-account, but in a less favorable way, because he mentions Cao Pi's proficiency at pellet chess to oppose games and other extravagances.<sup>①</sup> Illness is first mentioned in connection with a literary activity of a particular kind, Xiao Yi's attempt to memorize a genealogical handbook when he was thirteen. The identity of the *Genealogies of a Hundred Families* (*Bai jia pu* 百家譜) is uncertain, but if it was indeed the book that Xiao Yi's father, Liang Emperor Wu (Liang Wudi 梁武帝, r. 502–549), had commissioned Wang Sengru 王僧孺 (465–522) to revise, as many commentators assume, we have to imagine a voluminous work ranging from at least fifteen to possibly eighty scrolls.<sup>②</sup> Xiao Yi reports that he almost managed to commit this text to memory, but that the effort made him sick with what he calls “an illness of heart *qi*” 心氣疾.<sup>③</sup> He says that this illness was acute at the time but got better when he grew up—which also tells us that it must have stayed with him for several years—only to recur during personal crises later in his life when he was a grown man:

When I grew up, [this illness of my heart *qi*] improved incrementally. But when I then had to bury five sons in quick succession, I was so filled with grief that I was in a state of confusion and I suffered cruelly in my mind. When at home I felt dead inside; when out and about I didn't know where to turn. There were times when I felt as if my spirit was outside of my body and no longer belonged to me. When my eldest son [Fangdeng 方等, 528–549] did not return from the Southern Campaign, followed by the demise of my father, my thoughts turned to ashes and destruction, and I was at my wits' end.

及長漸善，頻喪五男，銜悲怳惚，心地荼苦。居則常若屍存，行則不知所適。有時覺神在形外，不復附身。及以大兒為南征不復，繼奉國諱，隨念灰滅，萬慮盡矣。

Xiao Yi follows this stunning admission with a philological and historical inquiry into his affliction. In its attempt to create a cohort of fellow sufferers, Xiao Yi's excursus evokes Sima Qian's list of distressed writers:

Since I suffered from heart *qi*, I repeatedly asked experts where the name “heart *qi*” came from, but most of

① *Jinlouzi jiaojian* 14.1348.

② *Jinlouzi jiaojian* 14.1351–52 n. 2.

③ Although Xiao Yi's condition has been interpreted in different ways, we have too little information to associate it meaningfully with any biomedical diagnosis. In the biography of the Northern Zhou physician Yao Sengyuan 姚僧垣 (499–583), Xiao Yi is described as “frequently suffering from an illness of the chest and abdomen” 嘗有心腹疾，which Yao Sengyuan, following pulse diagnosis, successfully treats by purging; *Zhou shu* 周書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1971), 47.841.

them did not have answers. I believe that Zhuangzi was describing heart *qi* when he wrote, “crying out without being sick, laughing as if being startled”<sup>①</sup> Manqian [Dongfang Shuo 東方朔, 154–93 BCE] once said. “When *yin* and *yang* [*qi*] fight with each other, then heart *qi* moves; when heart *qi* moves, then the spirit disperses.”<sup>②</sup> Hua Tan [d. 322] said, “If liver *qi* is faint, one’s face looks green; if heart *qi* moves, one’s face looks red.” Zuo Qiuming 左丘明 mentioned that “King [Jing] of Zhou died of heart illness” and that “Zichong perished of heart *qi*.”<sup>③</sup> Cao Zhi [d. ca. 288] also had heart illness.<sup>④</sup> Yin Shi, who was the father of Yin Zhongkan [d. 399/400], had this illness.<sup>⑤</sup> More recently, Zhang Siguang [Zhang Rong 張融, 444–497] also suffered from this illness after mourning for his parents.<sup>⑥</sup> Zhao Fei, Grand Astrologer of the state of [Northern] Liang, who worked on creating the Qianlu calendar for thirty years, died of a heart disorder.<sup>⑦</sup> And wasn’t Ruan Kan of the Jin dynasty, who was called Gentleman Mad, another one?<sup>⑧</sup>

既感心氣，累問通人，心氣之名，當為何起，多無以對。余以為莊子云：“無疾而呼，其笑若驚。”此心氣也。曼倩有言：“陰陽爭則心氣動，心氣動則精神散。”華譚曰：“肝氣微則面青，心氣動則面赤。”左氏云：“周王心疾終”，“子重心疾卒。”曹志亦有心疾。殷師者，仲堪之父也，有此病。近張思光居喪之後，感此病。涼國太史令趙敷造乾度曆三十年，以心疾卒。晉阮（裕）（侃）謂士狂者，豈其餘乎？<sup>⑨</sup>

Xiao Yi’s exemplars, drawn from ancient and recent history alike, are more of a motley crew than Sima Qian’s list. Whether the men he cites suffered from similar conditions as he himself did is difficult to determine, though, both for Xiao Yi and for us. Whatever the specific nature of his disorder may have been, Xiao Yi himself attributed his “illness of heart *qi*” to his excessive dedication to study as a boy. This self-diagnosis connects with a list of writers in the *Jinlouzi*’s chapter on “Establishing Words”

① Since this quotation is not part of the transmitted *Zhuangzi* and we lack information about its context, my translation can only be tentative.

② In a conversation recorded in his biography, Dongfang Shuo talks about the physiological effects of joy and grief in similar terms; *Han shu* 65.2852.

③ *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 Xiang 襄 3: “Zichong was so distressed by this that he came to be afflicted with a sickness of the heart and died” 子重病之，遂遇心病而卒 and Zhao 昭 22: “The king developed an acute heart ailment” 王有心疾. *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義, comm. Du Yu 杜預 (222–84) and Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648), in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 1930 and 2100; as translated in Stephen Durrant, Wai-ye Li, and David Schaberg, *Zuo Tradition/Zuozhuan: Commentary on the “Spring and Autumn Annals”* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 901 and 1606.

④ *Jin shu* 50.1391.

⑤ See *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian* 世說新語校箋, comp. Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–444), comm. Xu Zhen’e 徐震堃 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 34.6.

⑥ On Zhang Rong’s intense filiality, see *Nan Qi shu* 南齊書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), 41.728.

⑦ The transmitted sources do not have information on Zhao Fei’s medical condition.

⑧ See *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian* 19.6 and *Taiping yulan* 739.6b. In changing the name from Ruan Yu to Ruan Kan, I follow the emendation suggested by Xu Yimin, see *Jinlouzi jiaojian* 14.1356 n. 20.

⑨ *Jinlouzi jiaojian* 14.1351; see also Tian, “Twilight of the Masters,” 479.

(“Li yan” 立言), who suffered illness or even death because they worked their intellectual faculties too intensely: Yan Hui 顏回 (trad. 521–481 BCE, *zi Ziyuan* 子淵), Jia Yi 賈誼 (ca. 200–168 BCE), Yang Xiong, and Cao Zhi.<sup>①</sup>

In the following part of his self-account in its present reconstructed form, Xiao Yi goes back to when he was “young,” possibly just twelve years old. The reminiscence he offers confirms the image of himself as an ardent student:

When I was young, during summer evenings I would lower the red curtains and within the mosquito nets, where I kept a silver cup filled with sweet wine from Shanyin, I would read while lying in bed, sometimes until dawn. I reckon this had become my routine. I also suffered from a rash that left my elbows and knees festering all over.

吾小時，夏日夕中下絳紗蚊綯中有銀甌一枚，貯山陰甜酒。臥讀有時至曉，率以為常。又經病瘡，肘膝爛盡。

What in Xiao Yi’s preface reads like an almost idyllic scene of indulging in drink takes on a more somber atmosphere in the recollections offered by Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–590s) in the *Family Instructions of the Yan Clan*. Yan Zhitui introduces pain into the picture and turns the sweet wine from Shanyin into a medicinal—an explanation that is in line with the dislike of alcohol that Xiao Yi declares elsewhere in his preface:

Emperor Yuan of the Liang once told me: “In the past, when I was in Kuaiji and only twelve years old, I was already fond of learning. At the time, I was also afflicted with a rash so bad I could not close my hands or bend my knees. I would shut myself into my study, sitting all by myself behind drawn kudzu curtains to keep out the flies, often sipping from a silver cup filled with sweet wine from Shanyin to ease the pain. I had set my heart at reading history books by myself, twenty scrolls a day. I was reading without a teacher and I sometimes did not know a character or understand a phrase. Then I would go over the text again by myself, and I never got tired of this.”

梁元帝嘗為吾說：“昔在會稽，年始十二，便已好學。時又患疥，手不得拳，膝不得屈。（閑）（閉）齋張葛幃避蠅獨坐，銀甌貯山陰甜酒，時復進之，以自寬痛。率意自讀史書，一日二十卷，既未師受，或不識一字，或不解一語，要自重之，不知厭倦。”<sup>②</sup>

<sup>①</sup> *Jinlouzi jiaojian* 9A.857, see also Tian, “Twilight of the Masters,” 485.

<sup>②</sup> *Yanshi jiaxun jijie* 顏氏家訓集解, comm. Wang Liqi 王利器 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), 8.197; see also the translation by Xiaofei Tian, *Family Instructions for the Yan Clan and Other Works by Yan Zhitui (531–590s)* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), 151.

Assuming that Yan Zhitui's memory was faithful, this recollection not only adds information about the severity and discomfort of Xiao Yi's skin complaint, but also suggests that Xiao Yi brought up his illnesses in conversation. To go one step further, it indicates that such topics were freely discussed and nothing particularly unusual. This interpretation is supported by the context of the anecdote in the *Family Instructions*, where Yan Zhitui did not cite Xiao Yi's case because of his painful complaint, but rather because he wanted to call attention to this young prince's whole-hearted dedication to learning. Unfortunately, neither the author of the *Jinlouzi* nor Yan Zhitui mentions whether they associated Xiao Yi's skin disorder with his nightly reading. Was the rash an expression of the imbalance Xiao Yi had caused by overexerting his mental capacities? Or did the pain prevent him from sleeping and thus cause him to read all night? According to one *Jinlouzi* fragment, Xiao Yi continued working at night later in his life as well. Following his mother's exhortation to put serving his people above personal literary pursuits, he started doing administrative work by candle light and only retired at midnight.<sup>①</sup>

Xiao Yi continues his self-account by bringing up yet another detrimental health issue in connection with his fondness of learning:

In the past thirty-some years, I have leafed through more than ten thousand books. Since I was fourteen, I have been troubled by a persistent eye disorder. Later my eyesight turned dim, so that I could not read books myself anymore. For the past twenty-six years, I have always ordered attendants to recite them for me.<sup>②</sup>

比以來三十餘載，泛玩眾書萬餘矣。（曰）自余年十四，苦眼疾沈痼，比來轉暗，不復能自讀書。（三）  
（二）十六年來，恒令左右唱之。

Continuing the pattern established above—at twelve reading all night long while suffering from a severe rash, and at thirteen prompting an “illness of heart *qi*” by excessive memorization—Xiao Yi ascribed the eye condition that appeared when he was fourteen to his reading as well. The details are difficult to determine, though. We are neither sure at what time of his life he could no longer read books himself, nor about the degree of his visual impairment. It seems unlikely, however, that he suffered from sustained or complete vision loss. For one, we know that Xiao Yi was an accomplished painter and calligrapher. We also know that he felt contempt for the team work that lead to compilations such as *Lüshi chungiu* 呂氏春秋 and *Huainanzi* 淮南子, and that he prided himself on working and writing on his *Jinlouzi* on his own.<sup>③</sup> These are all activities that would have required at least partial vision, either in the temporal sense that his eyesight had its good moments, or in the sense that he was able to

① *Jinlouzi jiaojian* 13B.1334.

② For the emendation see *Jinlouzi jiaojian* 14.1358 n. 5.

③ *Jinlouzi jiaojian* 9A.8010–11; see also Tian, “Twilight of the Masters,” 479.

see to a certain degree, possibly both. Writing about his wide reading, Xiao Yi may nevertheless have intentionally chosen *fanwan* 泛玩, a phrase with strong tactile connotations that literally means “to leaf through and appreciate,” rather than a word that describes reading in visual terms.

Elsewhere in *Jinlouzi*, Xiao Yi evokes the sheer quantity of books waiting to be read:

Masters literature arose during the Warring States, and literary collections flourished during the two Han dynasties. Now we have arrived at a situation where every family has their writings and every individual their collected works. While the best succeed in relating sentiments and honoring customs, the worst only cram writing tablets and wear out later generations. While the books written in the past are already piling up, new books are written all the time. Even if you set all your heart to learning when you are young, by the time your hair has turned white you still will not have read them all.<sup>①</sup>

諸子興於戰國，文集盛於二漢，至家家有製，人人有集。其美者足以敘情志，敦風俗；其弊者祇以煩簡牘，疲後生。往者既積，來者未已。翹足志學，白首不遍。<sup>②</sup>

Although this passage from “Establishing Words” does not explicitly connect the overwhelming amount of reading to Xiao Yi’s physical condition, it rounds off the image he creates in his preface of a man who is severely challenged but at the same time uniquely persevering. From this angle, the evocations of the physical in Cao Pi’s and Xiao Yi’s prefaces both contribute to the fashioning of these (future) emperors’ self-images as capable rulers and writers, as divergent as they may appear at first sight. While Cao Pi exhibits physical prowess as the martial counterpart to the literary aspects of his persona, Xiao Yi emphasizes what it took and takes to conquer physical infirmity, that is, his genius and supreme determination. He moreover associates his illnesses and impairments with filial duty. How he frames the flaring up of his “illness of heart *qi*” after the loss of his father is certainly reminiscent of Sima Qian’s much grander strategy to save his moral wholeness in the face of physical damage. However, self-fashioning for the sake of posterity does not do justice to the illness narratives in Xiao Yi’s *Jinlouzi*—the preface is not the only place where he writes about his physicality, and he does it in greater detail than we have seen before. It rather appears that with Xiao Yi the writer’s body has finally come into its own.

When it comes to the autobiographer’s wish to control the image of themselves that would be left for future generations, Xiao Yi’s case offers a sobering perspective on the failure of such an effort.

① *Zhi xue* 志學 connotes Confucius’s autobiographical sketch transmitted in *Lunyu* 2.4, which describes the age of fifteen as dedicated to learning.

② *Jinlouzi jiaojian* 9A.852; see also trans. Xiaofei Tian, “Literary Learning: Encyclopedias and Epitomes,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Classical Chinese Literature (1000 BCE–900CE)*, ed. Wiebke Denecke, Wai-Yee Li, and Xiaofei Tian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 132.

Despite Xiao Yi's consistent attempts to connect his infirmity with his extreme dedication to study and to emphasize his perseverance in defiance of physical challenges, the official record casts him in a very different light. According to his biography in the *History of the Liang*, for instance, Xiao Yi's eye complaint did not start when he was a teenager and because he had studied excessively, but was a birth defect whose prenatal roots were substantiated by a prophetic dream of his father, Emperor Wu. The emperor is said to have tried to cure his seventh son himself but eventually failed and caused Xiao Yi to lose sight in one eye.<sup>①</sup> Another biography offers an utterly vindictive view of Xiao Yi's nightly reading as an adult by emphasizing how harshly he treated the attendants who were tasked with reading aloud for him, thus irrevocably tainting the image of ardent study and selfless work.<sup>②</sup> Biographical sources such as these have been dominant in the creation of Xiao Yi's historical image, and all but obliterated the persona of the hard-studying, persevering prodigy that the Master of the Golden Tower tried to establish for himself.

\* \* \*

In the self-accounts of Sima Qian, who is often called the founder of Chinese autobiographical writing, authorship emerged as firmly rooted in the writer's physicality. The four prefaces by Wang Chong, Cao Pi, Ge Hong, and Xiao Yi all display variations of this rootedness and suggest that illness and physicality became increasingly accepted as part of an author's identity and public persona.

What difference does it make if we consider how these authors represented their physicality in their self-accounts, that is, if we not only read these very well-known texts as disembodied voices speaking to us across the centuries, but also see their protagonists as full-blooded physical beings, subject to the onslaught of time and to mortality? There is, of course, the obvious: paying attention to literary representations of illness and healing can help us to perceive more of the spectrum of human experience preserved in these texts. Apart from that, these self-accounts also highlight important aspects of literary practice and the development of literature in early medieval China, among them changing notions of authorship and of what constituted refined literature, *wen*. As the example of illness suggests, the thematic scope of subject matters that were regarded as appropriate for refined literature, *wen*, expanded during the Six Dynasties, and illness gradually became an established topic

① *Liang shu* 梁書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 5.135. If we are to believe the historical record, Xiao Yi was teased cruelly for his affliction, not only by his half-brother, Xiao Lun 蕭綸 (519–551), but also by his wife, Xu Zhaopei 徐昭佩 (d. 459); see Lu Qinli 逯欽立, *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩, 2030; *Nan shi* 南史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 12. 341. See also Tian, "Twilight of the Masters," 479.

② *Nan shi* 8.243.

also in in poetry as the highest-register form of *wen*.<sup>①</sup>

The greatest gain for our understanding of early medieval literature may be the realization that illness and physicality *were* integrated into self-writing, despite the scarcity and the restraint of these accounts, and thus deserve to be incorporated into our understanding of early medieval discourses about selfhood and identity as well.

## 副文本中的健康與疾病：

### 早期和早期中古中國的五篇自序和一封書信

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**摘要：**在早期和早期中古中國，文人自我書寫的一種重要體裁是自序。本文探討公元前一到六世紀流傳至今的序言性副文本中有關疾病的直接敘述和涉及作者身體狀況的間接討論，重點關注司馬遷《史記》、王充《論衡》、曹丕《典論》、葛洪《抱樸子》和蕭繹《金樓子》中的自序以及司馬遷的《報任安書》，提出這些片段性“自傳”并非作者的自我揭露，而是服務于各自序言整體修辭策略的敘述。考察這些序言以及它們的互文關係將會揭示第一人稱疾病敘述在文學傳統中的變化：疾病和身體狀況作為作者形象和公共角色的一部分以及雅文學的主題，獲得了越來越多的接受。

**關鍵詞：**自傳 自我再現 副文本 疾病 身份

<sup>①</sup> I further explore this topic in “Teaching from the Sickbed: Ideas of Illness and Healing in the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra* and Their Reception in Medieval Chinese Literature,” in *Buddhism and Healing in China and Japan: Global and Local Perspectives*, ed. C. Pierce Salguero and Andrew Macomber (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2020), 57–90.