On the historical significance of Ts’ao Ts’ao in Chinese history

For more than a thousand years, Ts’ao Ts’ao has been regarded as a notorious man in Chinese history: fraudulent, suspicious, dictatorial, cruel and a great seeker for power. However, this impression has been very much the result from novels, in particular, "The Romance of the Three Kingdoms", and is thus misleading and superficial.

To understand Ts’ao Ts’ao, a knowledge of the epoch he lived in, the Later Han, is essential. As shown in the Chinese history, the period saw incessant warfare and the Empire was divided among its generals. Much of the land was uncultivated because of the incessant wars but at the same time, landless peasants were abundant. On the contrary, rich landowners held large private holdings but paid little taxation. The income distribution was in fact very uneven and the taxation system collapsed. The whole economic system had broken down. Besides, calamities were prevalent. As a result, the people lived in misery and yearned for a better and more peaceful way of life.

Ts’ao Ts’ao, one of the generals, succeeded in expanding his own political power, through annexing all the Northern areas and conquering the nomadic "barbarians" on the North. He thus accomplished the great feat of unifying Northern China and brought the barbarian invasions to an end. This brought about a more peaceful life for the Northern inhabitants.
In line with his desire of conquering the whole of China, many realistic reforms were carried out to strengthen his economic position. The most important of these was the exercise of T'un T'ien system (屯田制). Under this system, the government took back the ownerless land and distributed it to tenant farmers who in return had to pay fifty or sixty percent of their harvest as taxes. To ensure the proper running of the system, large scale irrigation works were also built. Besides, Ts'ao Ts'ao carried out a new progressive household tax system called Hu T'iao Tax (户调制) to curtail the power of the rich and the powerful. All these reforms worked successfully under Ts'ao Ts'ao's administration. However, we should not neglect the assistance of his officers whom Ts'ao Ts'ao had selected according to their ability not moral excellence. These officers contributed their talents in many ways to the country and so help to strengthen the economy and made possible a better life for the people.

Ts'ao Ts'ao has been blamed for his betray of Han Hsien Ti and putting the latter under his control. But it is very obvious that the incompetent Emperor was unable to put the disordered country in shape. What Ts'ao Ts'ao did was in fact helping him to conduct a healthier government which was beneficial for Hsien Ti as well as the people.

In the cultural field, by taking advantage of his political power, he promoted learning and raised the social status of the literary man. Besides, Ts'ao Ts'ao was also a man of letters. He wrote many memorable articles and poems which were in simple style and
realistic in approach. These works affected to a great extent other writers of the same period and they helped to establish the "Literary Style of Chien An" [建安風骨].

It is true that no man is perfect and although Ts'ao Ts'ao had many weaknesses, his merits far outweighed his faults. In conclusion, Ts'ao Ts'ao's contributions and achievements should be rightfully acknowledged. His place in Chinese history should be highly exalted.

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