

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 5.

A big thank-you to those of you who have visited our website and left me comments. Knowing that I actually have an audience is a huge motivation to keep going and keep improving.

If you haven't been to the website, when you are done with this episode, swing by [3kingdomspodcast.com](http://3kingdomspodcast.com), spelled with the number 3, and check out supplemental materials like maps of the key locations mentioned in each episode and links to additional information.

Also, a quick programming note: At the request of a listener, the website now has the transcript for each episode. These are the rough scripts and don't exactly match the audio word for word, but they are pretty close. So enjoy.

Alright, when we last left off, Dong Zhuo had just declared to the ministers that he was going to depose the sitting emperor and replace him with his brother, the 9-year-old Lord of Chenliu. No minister dared to make a sound at first, but then one man -- Yuan Shao -- stepped forward and accused Dong Zhuo of treason. Dong Zhuo did not take this piece of constructive criticism very well.

"The empire is in my hands! When I decide to do something, who dares to say no? Do you want to see how sharp my sword is?" he scowled at Yuan Shao.

"Your sword? Do you think my sword isn't sharp," Yuan Shao shot back as his blade flashed out of its sheath.

Dong Zhuo was just about to take a swing at Yuan Shao, but his adviser and wet blanket Li (3) Ru (2) stopped him once again.

"You can't kill people rashly while the issue remains unsettled," Li (3) Ru (2) said.

At this point, Yuan Shao, clenching his sword, bid goodbye to the ministers and left, not just the assembly, but the capital. He hanged his seal of office by the east gate of the city and then set out for Ji Province.

Back at Dong Zhuo's now no-doubt lively party, there was still the unresolved issue of deposing the emperor. Dong Zhuo turned to the imperial guardian Yuan Kui (2), who was Yuan Shao's uncle, and said:

"Your nephew was out of line, but for your sake, I have spared him. What do you think of my plan to choose a new emperor?"

Well, since Dong Zhuo put it that way, Yuan Kui (2) gave probably the only answer he could if he didn't want to lose his head.

"Whatever you think is right, sir."

Now this is more to Dong Zhuo's liking.

"If anyone dares to oppose this plan, he will be dealt with according to military law," he said.

A quick aside here: Pretty much anytime in the novel when you hear someone says so-and-so shall be dealt with according to military law, it basically means so-and-so would be executed. I can't remember any instances where military law called for a mere slap on the wrist. So the assembled ministers, understandably intimidated, promised to follow Dong Zhuo's orders.

After the feast, Dong Zhuo summoned Counselor Zhou (1) Bi (0) and Captain Wu (0) Qiong (2) to ask them what he should do about Yuan Shao.

"He left in anger. If you try to go after him too hastily, it will surely cause trouble," Zhou (1) Bi (0) said. "The Yuan family has held high office for four generations. Their proteges and clients are everywhere. If they put out the call, many warriors will flock to their banner. When that happens, the region of Shandong will be lost. Why not pardon him and give him a post. He will be happy about the pardon and won't be a concern anymore."

Wu (0) Qiong (2) agreed.

"Yuan Shao likes to scheme but is indecisive. There's no need to worry about him. If you give him a post, it will even help you win the hearts of the people."

Dong Zhuo took this advice and sent messengers to Yuan Shao to bestow upon him the governorship of Bohai (2,3). With that settled, he got down to the important business at hand.

On the first day of the ninth month, the Emperor was ... umm ... invited to the Hall of Virtue, where all the officials had been assembled. Dong Zhuo, with sword in hand, declared to everyone:

“The emperor is weak and is not up to task of ruling the empire. Now, hear my proclamation.”

Li (3) Ru (2) then read the following:

"The dutiful Emperor Ling (2) left his people too soon. The emperor is the center of the empire. But present Emperor is short on talent, dignity, and prestige. He has also been remiss in his mourning for the late emperor. Only the most complete virtue can grace imperial dignity. Empress Dowager He has trained him improperly. The whole state administration has fallen into confusion. Empress Dowager Dong died under suspicious circumstances. The doctrine of the three bonds---Heaven, Earth, and Man---and the continuity of the interdependence between Heaven and Earth have both been injured.

"But Liu Xie (2), the Lord of Chenliu, is sage and virtuous, and his appearance is awe inspiring. He conforms to all the rules of propriety: His mourning is sincere, and his speech is always correct. The entire empire sings his praises. He is well suited for the great duty of consolidating the rule of Han.

“Now therefore, the Emperor is deposed and reduced to the Lord of Hongnong (2,2), and Empress He must give up her powers.

"I request that the Lord of Chenliu accept the throne in accordance with the will of Heaven and Earth, the desires of the people, and the fulfillment of the hopes of mankind."

After Li Ru finished reading the proclamation, Dong Zhuo ordered the attendants to escort the emperor down from the throne, remove his seal, and make him kneel facing the north. Now, the emperor always sat facing south, while his ministers stood or kneeled facing him. So to face north is to

assume a position of servitude to the throne and in this case, it indicates that the emperor was no longer the master but now the servant. Dong Zhuo then ordered that the empress dowager remove her royal ceremonial dress and take her position as a servant of the throne as well. Both the emperor and his mother wept loudly, and their cries stabbed at the hearts of the ministers, but they did not dare to make a peep.

One of them, however, apparently did not get the memo and missed the rehearsal, because Ding (1) Guan (3), the chair of the secretariat, now shouted angrily, “Dong Zhuo, you traitor! How dare you insult the will of heaven with your scheme? I shall stain you with my blood!”

He then rushed at Dong Zhuo and tried to hit him with his ivory tablet.

In case you are wondering, this ivory tablet is something that ministers are supposed to carry with them in court. It’s a long, narrow, flat piece that serves as a symbol of office and also doubles as a notepad. If a minister has issues he wants to raise at court, he would write them on this tablet so he won’t forget. I have posted a picture of this with the post for this episode on the website, so go check it out if you are curious.

Alright, back to the action. So Ding (1) Guan (3) was trying to beat Dong Zhuo with this ivory tablet, which was basically just his way of saying, “Go ahead, kill me.” Dong Zhuo had no qualms about granting his death wish, as he ordered the guards to seize Ding (1) Guan (3), take him outside, and execute him at once. Ding (1) Guan (3), though, showed no sign of fear and did not stop cursing Dong Zhuo until he laid dead. His act of defiance was futile, but for his courage, he got his own poem:

The rebel Dong Zhuo conceived the foul design  
To thrust the King aside and wrong his line.  
With folded arms the courtiers stood, save one  
Ding Guan, who dared to cry that wrong was done.

After that brief interruption, the ceremony continued, and this time no one dared to utter a word of dissent. The Lord of Chenliu was placed on the throne, and all the ministers prostrated before him, proclaimed him emperor, and congratulated him on this ... umm ... happy occasion.

All this happened in the year 190. The former emperor, now the Lord of Hongnong (2,2), reigned for all of five months. Now you might be thinking, hey, maybe it's not so bad for him. After all, who really wants to sit on the throne and be Dong Zhuo's puppet? And it's not like you get slapped down to peasant just because you can't be emperor anymore. You're still a lord, which sounds like it would still be a life of luxury and comfort, just without the power, which you never had in the first place.

Oh, if only. You didn't think Dong Zhuo was just going to tell the ex-emperor to pick up his severance package and be on his way, did you? The deposed emperor, his mother, and his imperial consort, Lady Tang (2), were all essentially placed under house arrest in the Palace of Eternal Calm. Not only can they not leave, but no one may enter without authorization.

We will close the book on them in just a second. But first, for the great service of putting a new emperor on the throne, Dong Zhuo was given, or more accurately, he took the position of prime minister. He also got a nice set of privileges usually reserved for the most senior ministers: When he bowed to the emperor, he did not have to announce his name. When he went to court, he did not have to walk quickly, which was typically required of all the officials. And when he entered the hall where the emperor sat, he did not have to take off his shoes or remove his sword. In short, Dong Zhuo now held incomparable power, and he was stinkin' rich, too, thanks to that power.

But despite his power and wealth, Dong Zhuo had a bit of a PR problem, which might have something to do with the whole "Obey me and live; oppose me and die" vibe that he's been radiating lately. To deal with this, Li (3) Ru (2) advised him to hire people of reputation -- basically the equivalent of a sports team signing a bunch of big-name free agents to get its fans excited. Except in this case, when the team

own says “Hey, we would really like for you to join us,” you better say yes.

Case in point: Cai (4) Yong (1), the former court counselor who was dismissed by the eunuchs on trumped up charges -- remember him from the start of episode 1? Well, Dong Zhuo remembered, and he knew that Cai (4) Yong (1) was well-known as a man of talent, so he wanted to give him a position at court. When Cai (4) Yong (1) declined, however, Dong Zhuo did his best Marlon Brando impersonation and made Cai (4) Yong (1) an offer he couldn't refuse. But leaving a severed horse head in Cai (4) Yong's (1) bed would've been too subtle for Dong Zhuo. No, instead, he sent another message to Cai (4) Yong (1) saying: Either get your butt over here right now and take this job that I am so generously offering you, or your whole clan will be exterminated. Not surprisingly, Cai (4) Yong (1) accepted this gracious offer, which made Dong Zhuo so happy that he promoted Cai (4) Yong (1) three times in one month, all the way to court counselor.

Now, back to the deposed emperor, his mother the empress dowager, and his consort. As time went on, their gilded cage of palatial house arrest became less and less gilded, as daily supplies like clothes and food gradually diminished. The ex-emperor wept incessantly at their sorry state. One day, he saw a pair of swallows flying around, and the scene moved him to utter a few lines of verse:

Spring and the green of the tender grass,  
Flushes with joy as the swallows pass;  
The wayfarers pause by the rippling stream,  
And their eyes will newborn gladness gleam;  
With lingering gaze the roofs I see  
Of the Palace that one time sheltered me.  
But those whom I sheltered in all righteousness,

Let's not stay in silence when the days pass useless?"

He didn't know it at the time, but these lines and the disgruntled undertone they conveyed quickly got the ex-emperor in trouble. As you might imagine, Dong Zhuo keeps him under pretty close watch, and he soon heard about the poem. This was all the excuse he needed to do away with his prisoners. He sent Li (3) Ru (2) and ten guards to the palace. When they arrived, the ex-emperor, his mother, and his consort were in a room on the upper floor. When the maid informed them that Li (3) Ru (2) had come, the emperor shuddered. He knew whatever followed would not be good.

Li Ru entered and offered a cup of wine to the ex-emperor.

"What is the meaning of this?" the ex-emperor asked.

"It's a beautiful spring day, so the Prime Minister wants to send you a cup of wine to wish you a long life."

"If this is longevity wine, you can drink it first," the empress dowager said.

"You will not drink? Well then ..." Li Ru waved to his entourage, who came forward and presented two other objects: a dagger and a length of white cord.

"If you don't want to drink the wine, you can make use of these two."

Seeing this, the ex-emperor's consort, Lady Tang, kneeled and begged, "I will drink the wine for the emperor. Please spare him and his mother."

"Who do you think you are, that you dare to try to take the emperor's place?" Li Ru scoffed. He then raised the cup toward the empress dowager.

"Do you want to drink first?"

Realizing her end was near, the empress dowager now started to curse her dead brother, He Jin, for being an idiot who let a traitor into the capital and sowed the seeds for their destruction.

Ignoring her for the moment, Li Ru then turned to the ex-emperor and tried to force him to drink.

"Allow me to say farewell to my mother," the ex-emperor begged. He then sang these grieving lines:

"The heaven and earth are changed,  
Alas! the sun and the moon leave their courses,  
I, once the center of all eyes, am driven to the farthest confines,  
Oppressed by an arrogant minister my life nears its end,  
Everything fails me and vain are my falling tears."

Lady Tang then joined in:

"Heaven is to be rent asunder, Earth to fall away,  
I, handmaid of an emperor, would grieve if I followed him not.  
We have come to the parting of ways, the quick and the dead walk not together;  
Alas! I am left alone with the grief in my heart."

When they finished singing, they fell weeping into each others' arms. But Li Ru was untouched.

"The Prime Minister is waiting for my report. Quit stalling! Do you think anyone can actually save you?!"

The Empress dowager now railed at Li Ru:

"That traitor Dong Zhuo wants us dead, and Heaven has abandoned us. But you, the instrument of his evil, you and your clan will be wiped out!"

Li Ru lost his temper upon hearing this. He grabbed the empress dowager and pushed her out the



window, and she plummeted to her death. He then ordered the guards to strangle the Lady Tang and force the ex-emperor to swallow the poisoned wine.

The deed done, Li Ru reported back to Dong Zhuo, who ordered that the victims be buried outside the city, denying them the funeral befitting their royal status. After this, Dong Zhuo's behavior became even more atrocious. He spent his nights in the palace, defiling the palace maids and sleeping on the dragon couch, which is supposed to be the bed of the emperor.

Dong Zhuo's debauchery did not remain contained within the palace. One day, he led his soldiers out of the capital to the city of Yangcheng (2,2), where villagers had assembled to celebrate the spring festival. Seemingly just for the heck of it, he ordered his men to surround the villagers, slaughter all the men, and seize all the women and valuables. They loaded their booty and female prisoners onto carts, hanged more than a thousand severed heads on the outside of the carts, and returned to the capital to boast that they had just won a great victory against a band of rebels. They then burned the severed heads outside the city and divided the women and booty among the soldiers.

While Dong Zhuo was busy making himself the enemy of mankind, a cavalry captain named Wu (3) Fu (2) had had enough. He began to wear a breastplate and conceal a sharp dagger under his robe whenever he went to court, waiting for the opportunity to kill Dong Zhuo. One day, the opportunity presented itself. As Dong Zhuo was coming to court, Wu (3) Fu (2) met him on the steps outside the hall, pulled out the dagger, and tried to stab him. Unfortunately, Dong Zhuo, in addition to being rather corpulent, was also very strong, and he was able to hold off Wu (3) Fu (2) with his bare hands until Lu Bu came in and threw Wu (3) Fu (2) to the ground.

"Who ordered you to commit this treasonous act?" Dong Zhuo asked.

Wu (3) Fu (2) glared at Dong Zhuo and shouted his reply:

"You are not my ruler, and I am not your minister. So where is the treason? Your crimes fill the

heavens, and everyone wants you dead. It kills me that I can't tie you to chariots and have them tear you asunder to appease the empire's wrath."

Dong Zhuo ordered the guards to drag Wu (3) Fu (2) outside and carve him into pieces. Just like Ding (1) Guan (3), Wu (3) Fu (2) did not stop cursing Dong Zhuo until he was dead. Having survived one assassination attempt, Dong Zhuo now made sure he was followed by an entourage of armed guards wherever he went. So unfortunately, Wu (3) Fu's (2) good intentions have now made it harder for anyone else to try to take out Dong Zhuo. Nonetheless, for his brave yet futile act, Wu (3) Fu (2) earned a few lines of verse in the novel:

Wu (3) Fu (2) that loyal servant of the latter days of Han.  
His valor was high as the heavens, in all ages unequalled;  
In the court itself would he slay the rebel, great is his fame!  
Throughout all time will people call him a hero.

Around this time, Wang (2) Yun (3), the minister of the interior, received a letter from Yuan Shao, who was presently out in the provinces, serving as the governor of Bohai (2, 2). The letter said:

"The rebel Dong Zhuo has outraged Heaven by deposing his master. It's understandable that the common people dare not speak of him, but you, sir, suffer his atrocities as if you know nothing of them. How can you call yourself a dutiful and loyal minister? I have assembled an army and want to sweep clean the royal residence, but I dare not act rashly. If you are willing, then find an opportunity to take him down. If you need anything, I am at your command."

Well, that's nice and all, but coming up with a plot to get rid of Dong Zhuo was a lot easier said than done, especially when you are in the capital, where Dong Zhuo keeps close tabs on all the ministers.

Wang (2) Yun (3) simply could not come up with an idea.

One day, while he was in the company of a throng of longtime ministers, Wang (2) Yun (3) said to his colleagues, "Today is my birthday, I hope you will come to a modest banquet in my humble abode tonight."

Nobody was going to miss a chance to party, so everyone said they would be there.

That night, the banquet tables were set up in an inner room at Wang (2) Yun's (3) home, and his friends gathered. After a few rounds of wine, Wang (2) Yun (3) suddenly covered his face and began to weep.

Caught off guard, the guests asked what's wrong.

"Today isn't my birthday," Wang (2) Yun (3) replied. "I wanted to meet with you all, but was afraid that Dong Zhuo would suspect something, so I made up an excuse. Dong Zhuo slights the emperor and abuses power. I worry that the imperial house is in imminent danger. Who would have thought that the glorious empire founded by the Supreme Ancestor would end today at the hands of Dong Zhuo?! This is why I weep."

Moved by Wang (2) Yun's (3) lament -- or maybe it was the realization that they've all been suckered into getting him really nice birthday presents -- his guests began to cry as well, all except one. Cao Cao, upon seeing everyone around him weeping, clapped his hands and laughed out loud.

"[Laugh] If all the officials cried all night and all day, would that kill Dong Zhuo?"

Wang (2) Yun (3) took offense at this.

"Cao Cao, your ancestors tasted the benevolence of the court, too. Do you feel no gratitude or obligation to repay the country? Why do you simply laugh at us instead?"

"I am laughing at how absurd it is that no one here can come up with even one idea on how to kill Dong Zhuo. I may be untalented, but I can cut off his head and hang it at the gate to appease the people of the empire."

This got Wang (2) Yun's (3) attention. He got up and approached Cao Cao's table.

"What is your plan?" Wang (2) Yun (3) asked.

"Recently, I have subjugated myself to Dong Zhuo's service so as to find an opportunity to kill him. I've gained his trust and can get close to him. I've heard that you have a prized knife decorated with seven jewels. If you would let me borrow it, I will happily risk death to go to his residence and assassinate him."

"What great fortune it is for the world that you are willing to do this!" Wang (2) Yun (3) said. He then poured a cup of wine and offered it to Cao Cao as a sign of respect. Cao Cao took the cup, drained it, and swore an oath. Wang Yun then brought out his knife and gave it to Cao Cao, who hid it under his clothes. He then finished his wine and left. The other officials stayed for another round and then dispersed as well.

The next day, Cao Cao, wearing the knife behind his back, went to Dong Zhuo's residence and asked if the prime minister was in. The attendants told him that Dong Zhuo was in one of the auxiliary rooms, and Cao Cao went straight in. There, he found Dong Zhuo seated on a couch, with Lu Bu standing at his side.

"Ah, Cao Cao, why are you late?" Dong Zhuo inquired.

"My horse is out of shape and slow," Cao Cao replied.

"I just got some thoroughbreds from the west. Lu Bu, go and pick one out for him."

Lu Bu obeyed and walked out. Cao Cao couldn't help but secretly rejoice at his good fortune. With Lu Bu gone, this assassination just got a lot easier.

"This traitor is doomed," he thought to himself.

Cao Cao thought about pulling out the knife right then and there, but then he remembered how

strong Dong Zhuo was, so he held off and waited for a better opportunity.

Meanwhile, Dong Zhuo was getting a little uncomfortable. He was so rotund that he could not sit upright for very long, so he laid down on the couch and rolled over. So now he was facing inward, with his back turned to Cao Cao.

“The traitor’s time has come!” Cao Cao thought. He swiftly pulled out the knife and stepped forward to deliver the killing blow. But just then, Dong Zhuo caught a glimpse of Cao Cao in a mirror and hastily turned around.

“Cao Cao, what are you doing?!”

At that very moment, Lu Bu had returned with a horse and was standing just outside the room.

Cao Cao, with just the slightest of hesitations, dropped to his knees and held the knife out with both hands.

“I recently came into possession of a fine knife. I would like to make a gift of it to your benevolence.”

Dong Zhuo took the knife and looked it over. It was indeed a fine blade. It was about a foot long, with seven gems and an extremely sharp edge. So he handed it over to Lu Bu for safekeeping, while Cao Cao removed the sheath from his waist and gave it to Lu Bu as well.

Dong Zhuo then led Cao Cao outside to check out the horse.

“May I test it out?” Cao Cao asked.

Dong Zhuo told the attendants to bring the saddle and bridle. Cao Cao led the horse out of the residence, hopped on, gave the horse a few good whips, and sped off toward the southeast.

Now, you really have to hand it to Cao Cao for keeping his composure and thinking quickly on his feet. I mean, he was basically caught, red-handed, in the act of trying to assassinate the prime minister. Yet somehow, he almost immediately covered it up with a pretty slick excuse. Of course, whenever I read this part of the novel or watch it on TV, I can never quite understand how Dong Zhuo and Lu Bu could

be so easily deceived by Cao Cao's "Oh this is a gift for you" explanation. I mean, who presents an unsheathed knife as a gift while your back is turned?

Well, as it turns out, Lu Bu didn't quite buy it either. After Cao Cao left, he said to Dong Zhuo, "It looked like Cao Cao might've been trying to stab you just now. It was only because you called him out that he then pretended to present the knife to you."

"Hmm, I had my suspicions, too."

As they were speaking, Li Ru arrived. After Dong Zhuo filled him in on what just happened, Li Ru said, "Cao Cao has no family in the capital. He lives alone near here. Send for him. If he comes, then it means he has nothing to hide and thus truly meant to give you the knife as a gift. But if he makes any excuses and refuses to come, then he must have been trying to assassinate you. You can then arrest and interrogate him."

Dong Zhuo followed Li Ru's advice and sent four prison guards to summon Cao Cao. After a long while, they came back and reported that Cao Cao never returned to his house and instead hastily rode out of the city through the east gate. When the gatekeeper asked where he was going, Cao Cao told him that he was on urgent business on behalf of the prime minister, and sped off.

"There is no doubt about it. Cao Cao is fleeing because of his guilty conscience," Li Ru said.

Dong Zhuo blew up upon hearing this.

"Cao Cao, I trusted you! How dare you repay me with such treachery?!"

"He must have accomplices," Li Ru said. "Once we capture Cao Cao, we will find out who they are."

Dong Zhuo then put out the APB on Cao Cao. Drawings of his likeness were sent everywhere, along with this offer: Anyone who catches Cao Cao would receive a thousand taels of gold and be made a noble. Anyone who shelters him would share his crime and punishment.

So where did Cao Cao go? Upon leaving the capital, he made with all haste for his home, the

prefecture of Qiao (2). But instead of this turning into a dragged-out game of catch-me-if-you-can, he was soon recognized and arrested by guards at the gate of the county of Zhongmou (1,2). When he was brought in front of the county magistrate, Cao Cao tried to play the “you got the wrong guy” card.

“I am but a merchant. My last name is Huangfu (2,3),” he protested.

What he didn’t know, however, was that this magistrate had seen him before. The magistrate looked Cao Cao over closely, thought quietly for a bit, and then spoke.

“I once went to Luoyang to seek a position. I recognize you. You are Cao Cao. There is no use in denying it. Guards, put him jail. We will take him to the capital tomorrow to claim our reward.”

Well, things aren’t looking too good for Cao Cao at this point. So what kind of horrible death does Dong Zhuo have in store for him, and how many lines of verse will Cao Cao get for his brave but futile assassination attempt? Find out next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.