

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 6.

Before we pick up where we left off, I want to tell you about a couple new features on the website. First, I've started doing something I am calling Three Kingdoms Lifehackers. They are basically quotes from the novel that I think are pretty funny when taken completely out of context and applied to modern life. Second, and I am pretty excited about this, I've started creating network graphs for each episode to show how the characters are interconnected. I am hoping this will help you keep better track of who's who, who's serving whom, and who's killing whom as the number of characters multiply.

So go check out these new features, along with other supplemental material, on [3kingdomspodcast.com](http://3kingdomspodcast.com), spelled with the number 3.

Also, if you like what I'm doing so far, consider rating the show on iTunes, Doubletivist, Stitcher, or whatever platform you're using to listen to the show. Thanks!

So, where were we? Ah yes, Cao Cao had fled the capital after his failed assassination attempt on Dong Zhuo, but he was picked up by the guards at Zhongmou (1,2) County and brought in front of the county magistrate. Cao Cao tried the "You got the wrong guy" trick, but the magistrate called him out on it and told the guards to throw him in jail and that they will take him to the capital to collect their reward in the morning.

That night, however, the magistrate had his personal attendant secretly bring Cao Cao out of his cell and to the magistrate's room for questioning.

"I've heard that the prime minister treated you very well. Why did you bring this trouble upon yourself?" the magistrate asked.

"[Scoff] How can swallows and sparrows understand the aspirations of the crane and the wild goose? You've got me, so just turn me in and collect your reward. No need to ask so many questions." The magistrate sent away his attendants and then turned to Cao Cao and said, "Do not underestimate

me. I am no paper pusher. I just haven't found a worthy master yet."

To this, Cao Cao replied, "My ancestors enjoyed the benevolence of the house of Han. If I do not try to repay the country, I am no better than a beast. I stooped to serve Dong Zhuo so that I could find a chance to rid the country of this evil. My failure is the will of heaven."

"And where were you headed?"

"Back to my home. When I get there, I will issue a summon calling for all the powerful men in the empire to raise their armies and join forces to kill Dong Zhuo. That, is my will."

Upon hearing this, the magistrate personally removed Cao Cao's bonds, asked him to take the seat of honor, and bowed.

"Sir, you're truly a loyal and honorable man!"

Cao Cao bowed in return and asked the magistrate for his name.

"My name is Chen Gong. My mother and wife both live in Dong Prefecture. Your loyalty and honor have so moved me, that I'm willing to give up this post and follow you!"

Cao Cao was delighted to hear this. The two wasted no time. Chen Gong packed up some money for the road and gave Cao Cao a change of clothes. They then each took a sword and a horse and set off toward Cao Cao's home prefecture.

After traveling for three days, they reached Chenggao (2,1). It was starting to get late. Cao Cao pointed with his whip toward a hamlet deep in the woods.

"There is a man living there named Lü (3) Boshe (2, 1). He is my father's sworn brother. We can stay with him tonight and inquire about my family."

So the two rode to the gate of Lü (3) Boshe's (2, 1) residence, dismounted, and entered. When he saw them, Lü (3) Boshe (2, 1) was surprised.

“I’ve heard that the court has sent out orders for your arrest,” he said to Cao Cao. “Your father has gone into hiding in Chenliu Prefecture. What happened?”

Cao Cao told him about the whole failed assassination thing and about how Chen Gong released him. “If not for magistrate Chen, I would’ve already been hacked to pieces,” he said.

Upon hearing this, Lü (3) Boshe (2, 1) bowed to Chen Gong. “If not for you, sir, the Cao family would be wiped out. Please rest easy and stay here tonight.”

Lü (3) Boshe (2, 1) then went into the inner chamber of his residence. After a long while, he came back out and said to Chen Gong, “I don’t have any good wine at home. Let me to the nearby village to get some for you.” With that, he hastily rode away on his donkey.

So Cao Cao and Chen Gong sat and waited. ... And waited. ... And waited. Suddenly, they heard something from the back of the house. It was the unmistakable sound of a knife being sharpened against a stone. Cao Cao, understably, became suspicious.

“Lü (3) Boshe (2, 1) is not a blood relative. This looks fishy. Let’s go check this out.”

So he and Chen Gong quietly sneaked to outside the straw hut behind the house. There, they heard someone inside the hut say, “Tie him up before we kill him, right?”

“Just as I suspected!” Cao Cao whispered to Chen Gong. “If we don’t strike first, we will fall into their hands!”

So the two of them drew their swords, stormed into the hut, and killed everyone they saw, men and women, no questions asked. When their little spree was over, eight people laid dead. Cao Cao and Chen Gong then searched the house. When they came to the kitchen, they had a bit of a “oops” moment.

Lying on the floor of the kitchen was a pig, tied up waiting to be slaughtered.

“Cao Cao, you are too paranoid!” Chen Gong said, lamenting what they had just done. “And now your paranoia has made us kill honest people!”

Guessing that they probably just wore out their welcome, Cao Cao and Chen Gong rushed to get their horses and left the house. Before they had gone far, however, they ran into Lü (3) Boshe (2, 1) coming back from the village. On the saddle of his donkey hung two bottles of wine, and in his hands were fruits and vegetables.

“Nephew! Magistrate Chen! Why are you leaving?” Lü (3) Boshe (2, 1) called out to them.

“I am a wanted criminal. I dare not stay long,” Cao Cao replied.

“But I’ve already asked my people to kill a pig to treat you. There is no harm in staying just one night. C’mon back!”

But Cao Cao ignored this plead and began to ride away. But after just a few steps, he stopped, drew his sword, rode back, and asked Lü (3) Boshe (2, 1),

“Who is that behind you?”

Lü (3) Boshe (2, 1) turned to look, and at that very moment, Cao Cao’s sword sliced through the air and cut him down.

Chen Gong was horrified.

“What we did before was a mistake. But why did you do this?!” he asked.

“If Lü (3) Boshe (2, 1) gets home and sees what we’ve done, there’s no way he would just let us go. If he rounds up a big group and comes after us, we’ll be in trouble.”

“You knew it was wrong, and still you killed him! That is extremely dishonorable!”

“I would rather do wrong unto others than to have others do wrong unto me,” Cao Cao replied.

Those words left Chen Gong speechless.

A brief aside and some foreshadowing here. When all is said and done, Cao Cao is probably going to regret saying that last line the way Madonna regrets ever calling herself the Material Girl. Because that line, more than anything else he says or does in the novel, will come to define him.

For now, though, he had bigger concerns, like getting as far away from the crime scene as he could. The two rode on in silence under the moonlight. After a few miles, they came across an inn and went in to take shelter. After feeding their horses, Cao Cao soon fell asleep. Chen Gong, however, could not sleep. I will give you one guess as to why.

“I thought this Cao Cao was a good man and gave up my post to follow him,” he thought to himself. “But it turns out he’s as cruel as a wolf. If I let him live, he will no doubt do more harm later.”

At this thought, Chen Gong’s hands reached for his sword. But he had a quick change of heart.

“I followed him here for the good of the country. If I kill him now, it would be dishonorable. I will just leave him and go elsewhere.”

And so Chen Gong put his sword away, hopped on his horse, and rode off toward Dong Prefecture before sunrise.

When Cao Cao woke up and did not see his traveling companion, he thought to himself, “Chen Gong probably left thinking I’m dishonorable because of what I said. I can’t stay here long.”

So he pressed onward overnight to Chenliu Prefecture, where he found his father and told him what happened, though I’m guessing he left out the whole “do wrong unto others” bit. Cao Cao told his father that he intended to sell off the family’s properties and use the money to recruit an army.

“Our possessions are few and not enough for anything,” his father said, probably also thinking, “Oh geez, thanks son. First you do something that gets me placed on the hit list of the most powerful man in the empire, and now you show up and tell me you want to sell off everything we have?”

“There is a wealthy scholar here named Wei (4) Hong (2),” he continued. “He is virtuous and liberal with his money. If we can get his help, this plan might succeed.”

So Cao Cao held a feast and invited Wei (4) Hong (2). At the feast, Cao Cao said to the scholar,

“The House of Han has no leader, and Dong Zhuo is a tyrant. He slights his lord and is cruel to the people, making the whole empire gnash their teeth with rage. I want to help restore the Han, but I lack

the means. Sir, I know you to be a man of honor and loyalty, so I am asking for your help.”

“I have long wanted to do something,” Wei (4) Hong (2) said. “It’s just that I haven’t found a hero fit to take on the task. But now, seeing that you have such noble ambitions, I am willing to devote all I have to your cause.”

Elated, Cao Cao first sent out a decree from the emperor, calling people near and far to arms. Now, you might be saying, waaaaait a minute. We never heard anything about the emperor giving Cao Cao a decree. And you would be right. But you know, men of action like Cao Cao don’t let trivialities like the truth stand in their way. Besides, they kind of have to fudge the truth a little bit here, because if you are raising armies without the consent of the emperor, well, that’s generally called a rebellion, and nobody wants to be cast as the rebel, especially not when they are trying to convince people in the government’s employ to join their cause. We will see this again and again in the novel, where leaders on opposing sides play a game of “I’m not the rebel. YOU are the rebel. Oh, and here’s my secret decree from the emperor to take you out. ... Rebel.”

Cao Cao then began to recruit an army. He raised a white recruitment banner that read “Loyalty and Honor”. Within days, volunteers answered his call en masse. So just a fair warning here: In the next few passages, I’m going to hit you with a *blitzkrieg* of names. The novel has a tendency to just rattle off lists of people, regardless of whether they really matter. So far in our show, when I’ve come across passages like these, I’ve tended to avoid reading off all the names because I don’t think it does any good to swamp you with the names of minor characters. However, many of the names coming up are characters that we will see a fair amount going forward, so I feel like I should at least acknowledge their existence at the point when they are first introduced in the narrative.

So first, a quick introduction to some of the people who rallied to Cao Cao’s banner. The first was a man named Yue (4) Jin (4), and he was followed by a man named Li (2) Dian (3). Cao Cao kept both

warriors on his personal staff.

Next came two warriors from the house of Xiahou, which is descended from one of the generals who helped found the Han dynasty. If you remember, Cao Cao's father was actually born to this clan before being adopted, so these two warriors were actually Cao Cao's kinsmen. One was named Xiahou Dun. He had been playing with weapons since he was a kid and began learning combat skills when he was 14. At some point, he killed a man for daring to disparage his master. Since then, Xiahou Dun had been fleeing and living in exile. But when he heard that Cao Cao was raising an army, he and his cousin Xiahou Yuan (1) each led a force of a thousand men to come answer the call.

Shortly after that, more family members showed up at Cao Cao's doorstep. This time, it was two cousins from the house of Cao, named Cao Ren (2) and Cao Hong (2). They were both accomplished horsemen and fighters, and they each led about a thousand men.

Now that he's got some guys with names and a few thousand red shirts, Cao Cao began to drill this army. Wei (4) Hong (2) spent his money freely to buy clothes, armor, flags, and banners. And just as important, people from all around sent provisions.

Meanwhile, Cao Cao's fake decree reached Yuan Shao, who, if you'd remember from the last episode, had raised an army in the prefecture of Bohai and was looking for an opportunity to go take out Dong Zhuo. Upon receiving this call to arms, Yuan Shao gathered up everyone under his command, along with a force of 30,000, and left Bohai to go meet up with Cao Cao. Cao Cao then sent around another proclamation that read:

"Cao Cao and his associates, moved by a sense of duty, hereby proclaim the following to the empire: Dong Zhuo defies Heaven and Earth, destroys the state and injures his prince, pollutes the palace and oppresses the people. He is vicious and dishonorable. His crimes are countless. We have received a secret command from the emperor to gather men of honor, and we hereby pledge to cleanse the

empire and destroy the evil-doers. We are raising a righteous army and will combine our strengths to alleviate the empire's indignation, support the dynasty, and assist the people. When you hear these words, rise up and gather your forces."

Cao Cao's proclamation worked, as many rose up to answer the call. There were 17 contingents in all. And as much as I hate to do this, I'm going to hit you guys with a bunch more names here, since we'll be dealing with these guys in the coming episodes. But at least I'll tell you which names you can safely forget and which you should keep in mind. Ready? Here we go.

The first contingent was led by Yuan (2) Shu (4), the governor of Nanyang (2,2). He was Yuan Shao's cousin, and he led the force that did the bulk of the damage in wiping out the eunuchs at the palace after He Jin was killed. He is going to be one of the main movers and shakers in the coming episodes.

The second contingent was led by Han (2) Fu (4), the imperial protector of Ji Province. He is ... well ... not that important.

The third contingent was led by Kong (3) Zhou (4), imperial protector of Yu (4) Province. He is also not that important.

No. 4 was Liu Dai (4), imperial protector of Yan (3) province. You can forget him without any serious consequences.

Next up is Wang (2) Kuang (1), the governor of Henei (2,4) Prefecture. If this was an NFL draft, he would also be a bust.

And with the No. 6 pick, we have the governor of Chenliu (2,2) Prefecture, Zhang (1) Miao (3). Don't worry about him.

No. 7 is Qiao (2) Mao (4), the governor of Dong Prefecture. Again, another forgettable character.

No. 8 is Yuan (2) Yi (2), the governor of Shanyang (1,2). Not that important.



No. 9 is Bao (1) Xin (4), the Lord of Jibei (4,3). He was the guy who was telling people, “Hey, we’ve got to do something about this Dong Zhuo character.” But when nobody in the capital seemed willing to do anything, he took his army and left. And now he’s here.

And at No. 10, we finally have a guy who’s going to at least be a recurring character. It’s Kong (3) Rong (2), the governor of Beihai (2,3). He was a well-renowned official during this time period, and we will see him pop up in the novel from time to time.

So the top ten was rather disappointing. We have just one guy who will be a key player, two recurring role players, and a bunch of nobodies. Well, I promise that it gets better. But first, another relative nobody at No. 11 -- Zhang (1) Chao (1), the governor of Guangling (3,2) Prefecture.

At No. 12 is a man who will play a semi-important role in the story to come, mainly because of a botched attempt to suck up to Cao Cao. This is Tao (2) Qian (1), the imperial protector of Xu (2) Province.

And at No. 13, we get a guy who will get some airtime: Ma (3) Teng (2), the governor of Xiliang (1,2), which is, coincidentally, where Dong Zhuo was stationed before he went to the capital.

At No. 14 is Gongsun (1,1) Zan (4), the governor of Beiping (3,2), who is important because he was old friends with Liu Bei. Hey, speaking of Liu Bei, what’s he up to these days? We haven’t heard about him since, what, episode 3? Well, just ... you ... wait.

At No. 15, we have Zhang (1) Yang (2), the forgettable governor of Shangdang (4,3).

At No. 16, it’s Sun (1) Jian (1), the governor of Changsha, who first made his mark in helping put down the Yellow Turban Rebellion and whom we will most definitely hear from later on.

And at No. 17, we have Yuan Shao, and he’s already been a recurring character in our story and will figure prominently going forward.

So all these contingents varied in size. Some had 10,000 men, while others had 30,000. But they each had their own staff of military and civil officers, and they were all on their way to the capital Luoyang.

So there are a couple things we should note here. One, all these people I just mentioned are high-ranking provincial officials leading trained government troops. Up to this point, the biggest battles we've seen were between government troops and Yellow Turban rebels. And while the rebels certainly had a numerical advantage, they were basically just peasants. But now, we've got Cao Cao and 17 powerful provincial officials leading government armies to the capital to take on the prime minister, who also has a sizable government army at his disposal. So we're definitely looking at an escalation of military conflict here.

Second, notice how many of these 17 contingents I just listed were deemed unimportant in the novel? And these are supposed to be some of the most powerful officials in the empire. So what does that say about what's in store for the empire? Well, stay tuned. To help you, I've put up a scorecard on the website with this episode, listing these 17 guys so we can keep track of them and see where they end up.

So anyway, while one of these contingents, a force of 15,000 under the command of Gongsun Zan, was passing through the county of Pingyuan (2,2), they saw among the mulberry trees a small company riding toward them under a yellow flag. When they got close, Gongsun Zan recognized their leader. It was his old buddy, Liu Bei. So yeah, welcome back to the novel, Liu Bei.

"Good brother, what are you doing here?" Gongsun Zan asked.

"Thanks to your recommendation, I was made the magistrate of Pingyuan (2,2). I heard that your army was passing through, so I've come to salute you and invite you to come into the city and rest."

"Who are these two?" Gongsun Zan asked, pointing to the two guys behind Liu Bei.

"They are Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, my sworn brothers."

"Did they help you defeat the Yellow Turban rebels?"

"My success was all thanks to them."

“What offices do they hold now?”

“Guan Yu is a mounted archer, and Zhang Fei is a foot archer.”

“[sigh] Such a waste of talent!” Gongsun Zan lamented and continued. “Brother, all the powerful men in the land are going to take on the rebel Dong Zhuo. Why don’t you give up this backwater post and come with me to restore the house of Han?”

“I’m willing to go,” Liu Bei said at once.

Zhang Fei now chimed in.

“If you had just let me kill that bastard when I wanted to, we could’ve saved everyone all this trouble.”

Well, Zhang Fei did have a point. But it’s a little late for regrets. So the three brothers took a number of horsemen with them and followed Gongsun Zan to join the alliance against Dong Zhuo. Cao Cao welcomed this contingent as he did all the others, who trickled in and set up camps that extended over some 70 miles.

Once everyone had arrived, all the leaders gathered to discuss their plan. Governor Wang (2) Kuang (1) suggested that they must first choose someone to lead the alliance.

“The Yuan family has held high office for four generations,” Cao Cao said, “and their proteges and clients are everywhere. As a descendant of ancient ministers of Han, Yuan Shao is a suitable man to be our leader.”

And this is the point where Yuan Shao, as expected by Chinese custom, tried again and again to humbly decline this honor because “How can an untalented wretch like me, who is without fame, wisdom, skills, blah blah blah”. But everyone insisted, and Yuan Shao finally, and oh so reluctantly, accepted.

The next day, they built a three-story altar and planted banners of all the contingents on the east, west, south, and north side of the altar, as well as in the center. On the ends of the flag poles they

hanged white yaks' tails and golden axes, and emblems of military authority and the seals of leadership were set out. Once all the preparations were done, Yuan Shao was invited to ascend the altar. Clad in ceremonial robes and wearing his sword, Yuan Shao reverently climbed the steps. At the top, he burned incense, bowed, and recited this oath:

"Misfortune has befallen the House of Han, and the bands of imperial authority are loosened. The rebel minister, Dong Zhuo, has taken advantage of the discord to work evil. Honorable families have been struck by calamity, and the common people have been overwhelmed by cruelty. We, Yuan Shao and his confederates, fearing for the safety of the imperial prerogatives, have assembled our forces to rescue the state. We now pledge ourselves to exert all our strength and will to fulfill our duty as servants of the throne. There must be no ulterior motives. Should anyone break this pledge, may he lose his life and leave no posterity. Almighty Heaven and Universal Earth and the enlightened spirits of our forebears, be ye our witnesses!"

After the oath had been read, Yuan Shao smeared the blood of the sacrificial animals on his lips and on the lips of those who shared the pledge. All were deeply moved by the ceremony and many shed tears.

This done, Yuan Shao descended the altar and was placed in the seat of leadership in his tent, while the other leaders arranged themselves on two sides according to rank and age. And wine was served.

After a few rounds, Cao Cao said, "Now that we've established a leader for our alliance, we must all obey his commands and work together to support the country. There must be no feeling of rivalry or superiority, regardless of the size of our respective forces."

Yuan Shao took it from there:

"Though I am unworthy, you have elected me to be your leader. As such, I must reward merit and

punish offenses impartially. Let each man see to it that he obeys the laws of the state and the army. These must not be broken."

"Only your commands are to be obeyed!" everyone shouted in response.

With the formalities out of the way, Yuan Shao began issuing orders.

"My cousin, Yuan Shu, will oversee provisions and is charged with making sure that all the camps are well-supplied."

It should be noted that this was not some unimportant post. The guy in charge of provisions can literally make or break an army, since hungry men can't fight. By putting his cousin in charge, Yuan Shao was not only giving the task to someone he trusted, but also cementing his hold on power by having a family member in this vital role.

Yuan Shao then continued.

"Next, we need someone to lead the vanguard to Si (4) Shui (3) Pass and issue a challenge for battle. The other forces will take up strategic positions in support."

Sun Jian (1), the governor of Changsha, stepped forward and volunteered.

"You are valiant and fierce, and equal to this task!" Yuan Shao said. And so Sun Jian led his forces and made for Si (4) Shui (3) Pass. And when we are talking about a pass here, we are basically talking about a fort built on a mountain pass that essentially serves as a checkpoint for all travelers and a bottleneck for invading armies.

Getting wind of Sun Jian's army marching toward their position, the guards at Si (4) Shui (3) Pass sent a swift rider to the capital to report this urgent situation to Dong Zhuo. Ever since he grabbed power, Dong Zhuo had spent his days feasting and drinking. The urgent report reached his adviser Li (3) Ru (2), who went to see Dong Zhuo at once. Alarmed by the news, Dong Zhuo quickly assembled his officers to discuss how to proceed.

Lu Bu stepped forward and said, "Father, there is no need to be concerned. I see those lords beyond the pass as nothing more than a trifle. I will lead our fierce warriors to go cut off all their heads and hang them at the gates of the capital."

Dong Zhuo was delighted to hear this. "With you by my side, I can rest easy," he said.

But before he had finished speaking, someone behind Lu Bu spoke up.

"Why use an ox cleaver to kill a chicken? There is no need for General Lu Bu to go in person. I can cut off those rebels' heads as easily as taking something out of my pocket."

Dong Zhuo looked at this man and saw a warrior standing more than 7 feet tall. He had the broad back of a tiger and the supple waist of a wolf, the round head of a leopard and the shoulders of an ape. His name was Hua (4) Xiong (2). Delighted by Hua (4) Xiong's (2) eagerness, Dong Zhuo promoted him to Commander of the Valiant Cavalry and gave him a force of 50,000. He also sent three other officers -- Li (3) Su (4), Hu (2) Zhen (1), and Zhao (4) Cen (2) -- to accompany Hua Xiong to Si (4) Shui (3) Pass.

Meanwhile, back at the alliance camps, Bao (1) Xin (4), the Lord of Jibei (4,3), was entertaining some of those ulterior motives that the members of the alliance were supposed to, you know, not have. He was worried that Sun Jian, as leader of the vanguard, would be victorious and end this thing before anyone else gets involved and thus take all the honors for himself. So Bao (1) Xin (4) secretly dispatched his younger brother Bao (1) Zhong (1) with 3,000 troops. Their orders were to take the backroads, beat Sun Jian to Si (4) Shui (3) Pass, and challenge the enemy to battle.

When Bao (1) Zhong (1) showed up at the pass looking for a fight, it was just fine with Hua (4) Xiong (2), who was itching to show what he could do. So he led 500 armored cavalry and stormed down from the fort. Hua (4) Xiong (2) shouted, "Rebel, stay where you are!" Intimidated by how fierce Hua (4) Xiong (2) was, Bao (1) Zhong (1) turned and tried to flee, but it was too late. With one swing of his saber, Hua (4) Xiong (2) sent Bao (1) Zhong (1) tumbling off his horse to the ground dead. Most of Bao (1)

Zhong's (1) soldiers were captured, and Hua (4) Xiong (2) sent Bao (1) Zhong's (1) head to Dong Zhuo, who then promoted Hua (4) Xiong (2) to commander-in-chief.

Soon after this initial battle, Sun Jian arrived with the vanguard. Unlike Bao (1) Zhong (1), Sun Jian actually brought some talent with him. He approached the pass with four generals in his entourage. There was Cheng (2) Pu (3), who wielded an iron-spined lance with a snake-headed blade; Huang (2) Gai (4), who wielded an iron staff; Han (2) Dang (1), who used a heavy saber; and Zu (3) Mao (4), who carried a pair of knives. Sun Jian himself wore a helmet of fine silver wrapped with a scarlet turban. He carried a sword of ancient ingot iron and rode a dappled horse with flowing mane.

Sun Jian pointed up at the troops defending the pass and shouted, "Surrender now, you instruments of evil!"

Instead of going out there himself this time, Hua (4) Xiong (2) ordered his lieutenant Hu (2) Zhen (1) to lead 5,000 men to face Sun Jian. Cheng (2) Pu (2) rode out to take on Hu (2) Zhen (1). After just a few bouts, Cheng (2) Pu's (2) lance pierced Hu (2) Zhen's (1) throat, killing him instantly. With the momentum on his side, Sun Jian signaled for his army to charge forward and try to take the pass.

So the war on Dong Zhuo has commenced. Which side will emerge victorious? Find out next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms podcast. Thanks for listening.