

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

So originally, I wanted to do a supplemental episode just on Yuan Shao, the once mighty warlord of the north who controlled four provinces and a massive army but was routed by Cao Cao and died soon thereafter. Like I had done in a previous supplemental episode about Lü Bu after he exited stage left, I was going to take a look at the differences between the real, historical figure of Yuan Shao versus his fictional counterpart in the novel. However, once I started digging into the historical material, it seemed that the novel actually hewed pretty close to the historical sources as far as Yuan Shao was concerned. Figuring that was probably not going to make for much of an episode, I decided to combine the material on Yuan Shao with the story on Yu (4) Rang (4), a historical figure who was referenced in episode 35 in connection with the assassination attempt on Sun Ce.

So first, let's talk about Yuan Shao. Like I said, the portrayal of him in the novel is actually pretty similar to his real, historical self, from the various stages of his career to his personality. He came from the bluest of blue-blooded families at the Han court. Prior to him, four generations of his family had served in one of the top three ministerial posts at court. These positions were kind of like the emperor's cabinet. And Yuan Shao did lead the ultimately unsuccessful rebellion against Dong Zhuo, after which he did take over four northern provinces to turn himself into a major player. A lot of the other things about him in the novel -- from his denunciation of Cao Cao to his refusal to come to Liu Bei's aid because his son was sick -- seemed to all come from actual historical sources, namely the Records of the Three Kingdoms.

There WERE a couple discrepancies between fact and fiction. One was that the real Yuan Shao at one point actually tried to declare a distant relative of the imperial house the emperor, because he refused to recognize the young emperor that Dong Zhuo had placed on the throne. But the man he

had chosen for the job turned it down, which was probably not the worst idea. Though of course, that act also put this guy on the outs with Gongsun Zan (4) somehow, and he was later killed by Gongsun Zan. So damned if you do; damned if you don't, I guess. This little detail was left out of the novel entirely.

The second discrepancy has to do with the size of the armies that faced off at the key battle of Guandu. This was the battle where Cao Cao overcame a huge numerical disadvantage to crush Yuan Shao. Yuan Shao never recovered from this and died just a couple years later, and his empire soon disintegrated.

In the novel, we're told that Yuan Shao brought some 700,000 troops to the Battle of Guandu, while Cao Cao had 70,000 men, a 10-to-1 ratio. In reality, Yuan Shao's troops actually numbered around 110,000 -- including 100,000 infantry and 10,000 cavalry. So it was much less than in the novel. On the other side, Cao Cao apparently brought only about 20,000 to this battle. So he was still at a big numerical disadvantage, but more like 5-to-1 instead of 10-to-1. But it's understandable that the novel would want to exaggerate to play up Yuan Shao's incompetence in using the vast resources and talent at his disposal.

Alright, so that's pretty much it in terms of the main differences I found between Yuan Shao in the novel and Yuan Shao in history. Like I said, the book actually mirrors history very closely in this case. So let's bid adieu to Yuan Shao and talk about something more interesting.

In episode 35, we witnessed an assassination attempt on Sun Ce by three retainers of an official he had executed. The assassination attempt failed, and the retainers were all killed, but their courage and loyalty to their master drew praise in the novel, including a poem that compared them to, quote, Yu (4) Rang (4) of old, unquote.

So who was this Yu Rang? Well, I'll tell you. He was a historical figure from the end of the Spring and Autumn period, in the mid fifth century B.C. This was a time when China was split into many kingdoms. Yu Rang lived in the kingdom of Jin (4), which was one of the largest and most powerful kingdoms during the Spring and Autumn Period.

Yu Rang started out in the service of a couple of politically important clans in the kingdom, but was not really valued by either one. Those two clans were later wiped out by another family, the Zhi (4), and Yu Rang became a retainer of the Zhi (4). Unlike his previous masters, the head of this clan, Zhi (4) Bo (2), greatly valued Yu Rang and treated him with great respect.

But just as things were looking up for Yu Rang, trouble struck. The kingdom of Jin was ruled by a duke, but the real power had long rested with four major clans: the Wei (4), the Zhao (4), the Han (2), and the clan of Yu Rang's master, the Zhi (4). These clans were always maneuvering against each other to gain the upperhand. Eventually, hostilities got to the point where Yu Rang's master Zhi (4) Bo (2) decided to make a play at wiping out the other three clans.

In the year 456 B.C., Zhi Bo formed an alliance with two of his rival clans, the Wei (4) and the Han (2), to launch a military campaign against the other clan, the Zhao (4). This war lasted three years, but in early 453 B.C., Zhi Bo's army had forced the Zhao to hole up in their ancestral city. Zhi Bo rerouted a river to flood the city, and the city looked like it was about to fall any day now.

But in their darkest moment, the Zhao managed to convince the other two clans, the Wei and the Han (2), to switch sides. Basically, it was a "United we stand; divided we fall" pitch, and the Wei and the Han (2) were swayed. So they launched a surprise attack on Zhi Bo's army and crushed them.

When this attack commenced, the Zhao clan also stormed out of the city to join the battle. The head of the Zhao clan, Zhao (4) Xiangzi (1,3), had long held a personal grudge against Zhi Bo, who apparently had at one point tried to force him to drink more wine, and when Zhao Xiangzi (1,3) refused, Zhi Bo had splashed the wine on his face, a huge personal insult. So this was Zhao Xiangzi's

chance for revenge. In the battle, he captured Zhi Bo and killed him. But Zhao Xiangzi did not stop there. Legend has it that he then had Zhi Bo's skull made into a drinking vessel. So yeah, bear that in mind before you try to make your friends do one more round of shots.

After this, the three victorious clans, the Wei, the Han (2), and Zhao, divided up the land formerly held by the Zhi (4) family, and at this point, the kingdom of Jin was in practice split into three smaller kingdoms, which will assume the names of the clans that ruled over them. This split of the Jin more or less marks the end of the Spring and Autumn period and the start of the Warring States period.

But the larger geopolitical landscape is not important for our story on Yu Rang. What is important is that after his master Zhi Bo was killed, Yu Rang swore to seek revenge on the man who killed him, Zhao Xiangzi (1,3). To do this, he assumed an alias and posed as one of the convicted criminals who were being used as laborers in Zhao Xiangzi's home. He smuggled in a dagger and was looking for an opportunity to bury that dagger in Zhao Xiangzi's chest.

But before he got that opportunity, he was exposed. As Zhao Xiangzi was going to the bathroom one day, he noticed Yu Rang and started asking the other laborers who he was. Yu Rang's cover was soon blown, and he was seized by Zhao Xiangzi's guards and they found the dagger on him.

When he was interrogated, Yu Rang did not beat around the bush. "I am here to avenge Zhi Bo," he said plainly.

The guards wanted to execute him, but Zhao Xiangzi, who, despite his rather gruesome revenge on Zhi Bo, actually had a reputation for being broad-minded, held his would-be assassin in admiration.

"He is a man of honor," Zhao Xiangzi said. "Zhi Bo died without an heir, so his retainer has taken it upon himself to avenge his master. This is truly a man of virtue. I will just take care to stay out of his way from now on."

So against the advice of his guards, and even as Yu Rang was telling him that “I’ll be back,” Zhao Xiangzi let him go. That says a lot about Zhao Xiangzi and how much he valued honor.

This was not the end of the story, though. After being released, Yu Rang never gave up trying to avenge his former master. But of course, everyone around Zhao Xiangzi now knew to be on the lookout for him. So he needed a disguise. To do this, he kept putting paint on himself, and I don’t know what was in this paint, but it could not have been good, because his skin was soon covered with sores -- which was exactly what he was going for. Yu Rang did not stop there. He also swallowed charcoal until his voice became hoarse and unrecognizable. Yikes, dude.

With this new look, Yu Rang now prowled the streets pretending to be a beggar. Even his own wife did not recognize him. But one of his old friends did recognize him on the streets, and the sight of the new Yu Rang was so pitiful that his friend wept and said to him, “With your talent, if you would submit to serve Zhao Xiangzi, he would no doubt value and trust you. Once you have gained his trust, you can carry out your task. Would that not be much easier than this?”

Now this was a pretty smart idea, but Yu Rang would not hear of it.

“It would be disloyal for me to serve someone and then kill him,” he said. “I know what I’m doing is the much more difficult route, but I chose this path precisely to shame all the officials who serve their lords with disloyal hearts.”

So Yu Rang continued doing things the hard way. It took him a while, but he figured out Zhao Xiangzi’s daily schedule and the route he took. So on one of the days when Zhao Xiangzi was scheduled to go out, Yu Rang hid under a bridge that his target was going to cross over and waited.

But alas, it was just not meant to be. As Zhao Xiangzi was crossing the bridge, his horse suddenly became startled, and Zhao Xiangzi immediately suspected something was afoot. So he sent his men

under the bridge to investigate, and sure enough, they found Yu Rang and quickly surrounded him. And Zhao Xiangzi was like, “Oh, not you again.”

“Did you not serve two other families before Zhi Bo?” Zhao Xiangzi asked Yu Rang. “And did Zhi Bo not exterminate those two clans? Why did you not avenge them and instead became Zhi Bo’s servant? Zhi Bo is long dead, so why are you so hellbent on avenging him?”

To this, Yu Rang replied, “When I served the other two clans, they treated me as a commoner, so I treated them as a commoner would. But Zhi Bo treated me as a statesman, so I am treating him as a statesman would.”

In other words, those other clans did not recognize my skills, so they got what they deserved. And now I’m trying to give Zhi Bo, who did recognize my skills, what he deserves.

Zhao Xiangzi was really touched by this answer, but there was no way he could spare Yu Rang again, since Yu Rang was just going to come right back and try to stab him. For his part, Yu Rang knew that this was the end for him and that he was not going to be able to fulfill his goal of killing Zhao Xiangzi. So he now asked if Zhao Xiangzi would give him his outer robe. When Zhao Xiangzi asked why, Yu Rang said, “So I can stab your coat and kill you symbolically.”

Zhao Xiangzi granted this last wish and handed Yu Rang his robe. Yu Rang pulled out his sword and ran the robe through time and again. Then he looked up to the heavens and shouted, “Now I can answer to Zhi Bo in the underworld!”

With that, he turned the sword on himself and slit his throat, going down in history as a tragic hero who stopped at nothing to repay one who recognized his worth. And this is a theme that we see time and again in Chinese history and literature, including the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. How many times in the novel have we heard someone say that their lifelong wish was to meet a worthy master who recognized their talent, and having found that master, they would go to hell and back for him, all for the simple fact that he valued what they had to offer?

So that's the story of Yu Rang. I hope you enjoyed it, as well as our brief comparison of Yuan Shao the historical figure and Yuan Shao the fictional character. And I'll see you on the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.