

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

It's been awhile since I had time to put together a supplemental episode, so this is a long overdue farewell to Zhou Yu, the brilliant but not-quite-brilliant-enough Dongwu commander who, in the novel, was foiled time and again by Zhuge Liang, to the point where he became so aggravated that he died in episode 70. In this episode, we'll delve into the differences between the real and fictional Zhou Yu, and as we will see, the real-life Zhou Yu may have a good case for a defamation suit against Luo (2) Guanzhong (3,4), the author of the novel.

The novel actually stays fairly true to reality for the part of Zhou Yu's life leading up to the Battle of Red Cliff. During his youth, he became good friends with Sun Ce, the man who would go on to conquer much of the Southlands. The two became acquainted when Sun Ce's father, Sun Jian, relocated his family to Zhou Yu's hometown before going off to join the coalition against Dong Zhuo. Zhou Yu's family was a distinguished one, having served key positions in the government for two generations. When Sun Jian's family moved into town, Zhou Yu graciously allowed them to stay in his residence, and he and Sun Ce became very tight.

Later on, Zhou Yu's uncle was appointed the governor of Danyang (1,2), and Zhou Yu followed him there, while Sun Ce served under Yuan Shu after his father was killed. Like in the novel, when Sun Ce decided to make his play for the Southlands and conquer himself a little piece of the empire, Zhou Yu rallied to his banner and helped him achieve victory.

But in the novel, we don't really get any discussion of what Zhou Yu did after Sun Ce took over the Southlands. One might assume he just stayed on with Sun Ce, but this was not so. He actually returned to his uncle, at the behest of Sun Ce, who told Zhou Yu that he had plenty enough

manpower to finish mop-up duties in the Southlands and that Zhou Yu should go back to hold down the fort at Danyang.

Not long after this, though, Yuan Shu sent his younger brother to replace Zhou Yu's uncle as the governor of Danyang, and Zhou Yu and his uncle moved to Shochun (4,1), Yuan Shu's seat of power. That kind of left Zhou Yu without a gig. Yuan Shu wanted to bring Zhou Yu into his service, but Zhou Yu deduced, correctly, that Yuan Shu wasn't going to amount to anything. So Zhou Yu simply asked Yuan Shu to allow him to serve as a mere county head in a place called Juchao (1,2).

Yuan Shu granted this request, but he would soon regret it, because Zhou Yu had no intention of staying in Juchao (1,2). He just wanted permission to go there because it was a convenient place to hop across the Yangzi (2,3) River and enter the territory of Dongwu, which he did in 198 and was greeted personally by Sun Ce. Sun Ce appointed him to a key post and gave him 2,000 men and 50 horses.

At this time, Zhou Yu was just 24, and the people of Dongwu took to calling him Zhou Lang (2), which means the Young Zhou, or Zhou the Youth. This nickname, coined in adoration, would stick with Zhou Yu at least in the novel. But it would often come to be used dismissively, as a way to mock Zhou Yu as inexperienced.

In the year 200, just two years after Zhou Yu joined Sun Ce, Sun Ce died from wounds he suffered in an assassination attempt, but we could see Zhou Yu had already achieved a high standing in Dongwu at this point by the fact that he and Zhang Zhao, one of the most senior advisers, were the two guys put in charge of helping Sun Ce's brother Sun Quan administer the Southlands.

Just like in the novel, Zhou Yu was the leading advocate of an antagonistic gesture toward Cao Cao. When Cao Cao requested that Sun Quan send a son to the capital as hostage, while Zhang Zhao and other officials were indecisive as to how to respond, Zhou Yu was firmly against it, for the reasons he expressed in episode 47. When Sun Quan asked his mom for her opinion, she told him, "Zhou Yu is

right. He is about the same age as Sun Ce, just a month younger. I see him as a son, and you should treat him as your old brother.” In other words, do as he says.

And of course, later on, when Cao Cao was knocking on Dongwu’s door with his massive army, Zhou Yu was one of the few voices telling Sun Quan to resist. On this point, both history and fiction agree. Where the two differ greatly, however, is Zhou Yu’s role once Sun Quan decided to fight Cao Cao. In the novel, while Zhou Yu led the Dongwu army, it was Zhuge Liang who was devising the master plan to repel Cao Cao. In reality, as we discussed in the supplemental episode specifically about the Battle of Red Cliff, it was kind of the other way around, where Zhou Yu and Dongwu’s forces played the leading role, while Zhuge Liang was just kind of along for the ride.

One interesting note is that the episode about Cao Cao sending Zhou Yu’s old school buddy Jiang Gan to try to persuade him to switch sides actually happened, though it’s not stated whether that happened during the prelude to Red Cliff like in the novel. Also, there is no indication that Zhou Yu used Jiang Gan to trick Cao Cao into executing his naval commanders. All we get from the historical records is that Zhou Yu basically told Jiang Gan that his loyalty to Sun Quan was unwavering.

Whereas the novel takes quite a bit of liberty with the Battle of Red Cliff, it reverts to being pretty close to history in the battles that followed between Dongwu and Cao Cao’s forces for control of Jing Province. Just like in the novel, Zhou Yu was wounded during one of these battles, but then sprang to his feet to inspire his men to victory. However, there was no underhanded maneuvers by Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang to steal cities out from under him. Instead, Sun Quan appointed Zhou Yu to the governor of the city of Nanjun, while Liu Bei was named the imperial protector of Jing Province.

But it was historically true that Zhou Yu was very wary of the threat that Liu Bei presented. When Liu Bei visited Sun Quan, Zhou Yu did indeed write to Sun Quan and told him to keep Liu Bei distracted with beautiful women, nice swag, and fancy quarters. Of course, the novel spins this whole thing into

an elaborate scheme to seduce Liu Bei and keep him under basically house arrest in Dongwu. Whereas in the novel, Sun Quan was all on board with the scheme and was only foiled by the cunning of Zhuge Liang, in history, Sun Quan rejected Zhou Yu's suggestion because with Cao Cao looming large in the north, he decided he would rather have more allies than enemies, and he also worried that Liu Bei would be hard to control.

Another significant point of divergence between fact and fiction concerns the invasion of the Riverlands. Whereas in the novel, Zhou Yu concocts the idea of leading Dongwu troops to invade the Riverlands as a front for an attack on Jing Province, in history, he actually proposed this invasion for real. He told Sun Quan that Cao Cao had been recently defeated and thus was not a threat for the time being. So he wanted to use that opportunity to first take the Riverlands from Liu Zhang and then take the region of Hanzhong from Zhang Lu. The idea was that Dongwu would then form an alliance with Ma Chao and prep for an invasion north into Cao Cao's territory.

Sun Quan consented to this plan, and Zhou Yu began making preparations. But alas, he soon fell ill and died in the year 210 at the age of 36. There is no mention in the historical records that his death had anything to do with being repeatedly outmaneuvered by Zhuge Liang. In fact, there's no historical record of him being outmaneuvered by Zhuge Liang.

Moreover, according to the historical description of his personality from the historical records, it seems unlikely that he'd get so hung up on being bested by another so as to drive himself to his death. Zhou Yu was said to be magnanimous and generous, quite a departure from the talented but insanely jealous character from the novel. As an example, the Records of the Three Kingdoms cited the beef between Zhou Yu and Cheng Pu when Cheng Pu was appointed as Zhou Yu's subordinate. This was briefly touched on in the novel, where Cheng Pu was feeling put out because he was much

older than Zhou Yu but had to serve under him, like a 30-year veteran who's being supervised by some damn millennial. As a result, Cheng Pu frequently insulted and mocked Zhou Yu, but Zhou Yu responded with incredible tolerance. Eventually, Cheng Pu was so impressed that he came to respect Zhou Yu and told others, "Being friends with Zhou Yu is like appreciating fine wine -- you get absorbed and intoxicated without realizing it."

But if you were a musician, there was one thing that Zhou Yu did that would probably drive you nuts. He was said to be extremely well-versed in music, so well-versed, in fact, that even when he's drunk, he could instantly detect it if you played a single wrong note. And more annoyingly, whenever that happened, he would look up at you, and since it was well-known that he did this, if you were a musician playing at a party, the last thing you want is for Zhou Yu to look up at you, because then everyone would know that you played a wrong note.

So all in all, I think the general arc of Zhou Yu's real-life career is captured by the novel, but Zhou Yu is certainly one of the guys who would have a bone to pick with the way he was depicted in the novel. After all, how do you go from from being described by your contemporaries as magnanimous and generous to being passed down through the centuries as obscenely jealous? In Chinese culture, Zhou Yu is often held up as a lesson for the need to be more tolerant, like "Dude, you've got to just let that go, because c'mon, you don't want to end up like Zhou Yu, do you?" Oh, and also, the novel credited all his glorious real-life accomplishments at Red Cliff to Zhuge Liang instead, which would be exactly the kind of the thing that would drive the fictional Zhou Yu nuts.

Alright, so that's a quick look at some of the similarities and differences between Zhou Yu the historical figure and Zhou Yu the fictional character. I will see you next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!