

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 88.

So last time, Cao Cao had just become the King of Wei, but he got a strange visit from a strange Taoist priest named Zuo Ci. This guy first threatened to cut off Cao Cao's head if he did not abdicate and yield his title to Liu Bei. Cao Cao threw him in prison for that, but Zuo Ci was impervious to all forms of torture and no chains could hold him. He then crashed a banquet that Cao Cao was throwing for his officials. At this party, Zuo Ci wowed the guests with one trick after another, but Cao Cao remained a nonbeliever and more than a little suspicious. So, when Zuo Ci offered him a cup of wine that allegedly promised long life, Cao Cao understandably declined.

"You drink first," Cao Cao said.

Zuo Ci now pulled out a jade hairpin from his hair and with one stroke, he divided the wine into two halves, which was an impressive feat. He drank half and offered the other half to Cao Cao, but Cao Cao scoffed. Zuo Ci now tossed the cup up in the air, and it turned into a white turtledove and flew away. As all the officials looked up at the dove, they suddenly noticed that, hey, Zuo Ci was gone.

"He went out through the palace gates," attendants told them.

"Such a black magician must be eliminated, or he will surely cause harm," Cao Cao said. So he ordered the general Xu Chu to lead 300 armored soldiers to chase down Zuo Ci and arrest him.

So Xu Chu and company rode out to the city gates, where they spotted Zuo Ci casually strolling up ahead in his wooden clogs. Xu Chu spurred on his horse, but no matter how fast he was riding and how slowly Zuo Ci was walking, Xu Chu just could not make up any ground on him.

This strange chase went on until they went up a mountain. A young shepherd just happened to be coming their way with his flock of sheep. Zuo Ci walked right into this flock. Xu Chu pulled out his bow

and arrow, but could find no sign of Zuo Ci. Well then, better to be safe than sorry, Xu Chu thought to himself, and he proceeded to slaughter the entire flock of sheep before heading back.

The poor little shepherd was left weeping by the carcasses of his dead sheep, having lost his flock for seemingly no reason at all. But suddenly, one of the sheep's head that Xu Chu had severed spoke to the child as it laid on the ground, "Put the heads of the sheep back on their bodies."

Uhh ... ok, now this is getting really freaky. The kid certainly thought so, as he covered his face and began to run away. But he soon heard someone calling out from behind, "No need to run away. Here's your sheep back."

The kid turned around and saw that Zuo Ci had already revived all the dead sheep. The kid was just about to ask what the hell is going on, but Zuo Ci simply flicked his sleeve and departed like the wind. In the span of just a few seconds, he had vanished.

The shepherd, half frightened out of his mind and half relieved at getting his flock back, told his master what had transpired. His master thought that he best report this to Cao Cao. Cao Cao ordered that drawings of Zuo Ci's likeness be posted everywhere, along with an order for his arrest. Well, it took no time at all for Cao Cao's soldiers to track down and arrest a half-blind, half-crippled priest wearing a headdress of white vines, a gray Taoist robe, and wooden clogs. And then they found another one ... and another ... and another ... and another ... and another. Within three days, they had rounded up almost 400 men who looked exactly like Zuo Ci. Umm, so now what?

Cao Cao had a simple answer: Kill them all. He ordered his officers to pour pig and sheep's blood on the 300-some versions of Zuo Ci, a trick that's believed to neutralize black magic. This done, he ordered the prisoners to be taken to the training grounds south of the city. Cao Cao personally led 500 armored guards to surround the training grounds and watched as his men beheaded every single Zuo Ci. As their heads rolled, a wisp of blue smoke rose from each Zuo Ci's neck. The 300-some wisps of

blue smoke rose to the sky, where they coalesced into yet another Zuo Ci. This Zuo Ci flagged down a passing white crane like it was a taxi cab and hopped on. He then clapped his hands and laughed.

“The earth rat follows the golden tiger; the villain is shortly doomed,” Zuo Ci said.

I’ll explain what this cryptic remark means many episodes from now, but at this moment, Cao Cao was in no mood for this. He ordered his men to shoot Zuo Ci down, but just as they raised their bows, a powerful gale kicked up, sweeping pebbles and sand into the air. While the wind was howling, the 300-some headless corpses on the ground suddenly all leaped to their feet, grabbed their disembodied heads, and sprinted onto the platform where Cao Cao was seated to beat him. This sight shocked everyone present, and Cao Cao’s men covered their faces and fell to the ground in terror.

Just then, though, the wind suddenly stopped, and all the headless bodies vanished as well. There was only Cao Cao, who had fallen down as he braced for the attack. His attendees helped him back to the palace, but he soon fell ill from the shock, and no medicine could alleviate his symptoms.

One day, Cao Cao got a visit from a provincial official, who asked him, “Have your highness heard of Guan (3) Lu (4), the marvelous diviner?”

“I’ve only heard of his name, but not his skills,” Cao Cao said. “Please tell me.”

Oh boy. Strap yourself in for a half chapter’s worth of backstory about a one-off character. Thanks Cao Cao! Well, I’ll try to abbreviate some of this background stuff and make it easier on you.

So this guy Guan (3) Lu (4) was an ugly man who was too fond of his liquor. When he was young, he would study the stars deep into the night. When he got older, he began to get into divination, fortune-telling, and such. One time, a governor who had heard about this kid who was a master diviner decided to put that reputation to the test. He gathered 100-some skilled orators and invited Gua Lu to debate with them about the finer points of divination. Well, Guan Lu gamely stepped up to the challenge and wowed them all. After that, they all took to calling him a wunderkind.

And now, the novel gives us a series of stories meant to illustrate Guan Lu's skills. These are actually kind of interesting, so I'll go over a few of them. In the first story, there were three brothers who all became lame. They asked Guan Lu for a divination. He told them, "There's a female ghost haunting your family's graves. She must be an aunt on your father's side. A while back, during a famine, you pushed her into a well and crushed her head with a big rock, all for a few pecks of grain. Her desolate spirit is now appealing to heaven for justice. The affliction that plagues you and your brothers is a retribution from heaven and cannot be warded off."

When they heard these words, the three brothers wept and fessed up to their heinous crime.

In the second story, a governor's wife was suffering frequent headaches, and his son was plagued with frequent chest pains. So the governor called in Guan Lu to take a look. He told them, "There are two dead bodies buried under the west corner of this hall. One is a man holding a spear, while the other is a man holding a bow and arrow. Their heads are inside the walls, while their feet are outside. The one holding the spear is stabbing your wife's head, hence her headaches. The one with the bow and arrow is aiming at your son's chest, hence his chest pains."

So the governor told his men to start digging in the west corner of the hall, and sure enough, deep beneath the ground, they found two coffins, one containing a spear and the other a set of bow and arrows. The wood on the coffin had long ago rotted away. Guan Lu had the bones buried a few miles outside the city, and just like that, the governor's wife and son recovered. So the next your body starts having mysterious aches and pains, start digging.

In the third story, Guan Lu was out walking in the countryside one day when he saw a young man working in the fields. Guan Lu stood and watched him for a long while, and then walked up to him and asked him for his name and age. The young man told Guan Lu his name and that he was 19 years old.

In turn, Guan Lu told him, "I see between your eyebrows the sign of death. You'll be dead within three days. You are a handsome young man, but pity that you are not blessed with a long life."

The stunned young man hurried home and told his father what had transpired, and the old man ran out, caught up to Guan Lu, fell to his knees, and wept as he begged Guan Lu to save his son.

"This is heaven's will; how can I intervene?" Guan Lu said.

"But this son is all I have," the old man said. "I hope you will save him!"

The young man joined in on the pleading as well, and eventually, their tears moved Guan Lu. So he told the young man, "Prepare a jar of pure wine and a piece of dried venison. Tomorrow, go to the foot of the hills in the south. There, under a large tree, you'll find two men playing chess on a flat slab of rock. One of them will be seated facing South. He'll be wearing white, and his appearance is unsightly. The other will be seated facing North, wearing red, and he will have a fair appearance. While they're caught up in their chess match, present the wine and the venison. Once they have eaten and drunken your offering, kneel on the ground, cry, and beg them for longevity. You will get your wish. But do not mention that this was my idea."

So the father and son asked Guan Lu to stay with them overnight. The next morning, the young man did as Guan Lu instructed. After walking into the hills for a couple miles, he indeed came upon two guys playing chess on a slab of rock under a big pine tree. They were enraptured by their game and paid no attention at all to the young man. The young man kneeled and presented the wine and the venison, and the two chess players helped themselves to the food and drink, never looking up from their chess board.

Soon, the wine had been drunken and the venison eaten. Now, the young man cried, kneeled, and asked for long life. The two chess players were alarmed.

"This must be Guan Lu's doing," the man wearing red said. "Well, since we accepted your offering, we must take pity on you."

The man wearing white now took out a register, flipped through it, and told the young man, "You were destined to die at the age of 19. We'll add a stroke to that and allow you to live to 99. But when you go back to see Guan Lu, tell him to not reveal the secrets of heaven anymore, or he will feel heaven's wrath."

The man in red took out a pen and made the change in the register, and just then, a fragrant wind blew, and the two men morphed into two white cranes and soared into the sky. Well, ok then. The young man, probably more than a bit befuddled, went home and asked Guan Lu what that was all about.

"The man in red was the Southern Dipper, and the one in white was the Northern Dipper," Guan Lu told him. And by the way, both of these constellations were seen as immortal beings.

"I have heard that the Northern Dipper is consisted of nine stars, so how can it be just one person?" the young man asked.

"When they part, they become nine; when they join, they turn into one," Guan Lu explained. "The Northern Dipper marks death, while the Southern Dipper marks life. Now that they have extended your life, you have no further worries."

Well, of course there's whole thing of living the next 80 years knowing when you'll die, but for the time being, the father and son were both happy and grateful to Guan Lu. For his part, Guan Lu heeded the two Dippers' warning and would not lightly reveal heaven's will from that point on.

So the provincial official that came to visit Cao Cao told him that he should summon Guan Lu and ask for a divination, especially since he was nearby. Cao Cao was delighted and immediately sent someone to fetch the diviner.

When Guan Lu arrived, Cao Cao first asked him to explain the meaning behind the whole incident with Zuo Ci, but Guan Lu said, "That's just simple black magic; there's no need to be concerned."

Well, ok then. Since the marvelous diviner said there's nothing to worry, Cao Cao decided that there was nothing to worry about. Just like that, his mind was at ease, and he began to recover from his illness. He then asked Guan Lu to divine the affairs of state. Guan Lu responded with these cryptic lines:

Three and eight run crisscross;

A yellow pig meets a tiger.

South of the outpost,

You will lose a limb.

Cao Cao then asked about his line of succession, to which Guan Lu said:

In the palace of the lion,

The ancestral tablet takes its place.

Kingship is renewed,

His posterity will know the ultimate honor.

Umm, can you provide some more specifics, Cao Cao asked. To which Guan Lu said, oh don't be silly. Vague and vast is heaven's will, and no man can foretell them. Once they have come to pass, the fates will be confirmed.

But, if no one can foretell heaven's will, then why did I bother asking you to come? That'd be what I would ask Guan Lu. Cao Cao, however, was much less skeptical. In fact, he wanted to give Guan Lu a nice, cushy government job, but Guan Lu turned it down on account of the meager lot to which his life had been assigned. That and his ugly face.

“My forehead is misshapen, and my eyes lackluster,” Guan Lu said. “My nose has no bridge; my feet, no Achilles tendons. The marks of long life are absent from my back and stomach. I’m good for dealing with the ghosts on Mount Tai (4), but not with living men.”

Well, alright then, Mr. Ghostbuster. Can you read my destiny from my looks, Cao Cao asked him.

“You are already the highest vassal in the land, so what need is there to know your fortune?”

Guan Lu said.

Cao Cao pressed him on this, but Guan Lu just smiled and declined to answer. Cao Cao then changed gears and asked Guan Lu to assess his officials and officers from their looks. Guan Lu simply said, “They’re all officers to rule the age.”

Cao Cao then asked about his own fortune, but Guan Lu again played coy and refused to provide any in-depth answers. Cao Cao then asked him about the two regions he had yet to conquer: Dongwu and Xishu (1,2). And by the way, Xishu (1,2) just means West Shu (2), aka the Riverlands.

“Dongwu has lost a major commander, while Xishu is encroaching with troops,” Guan Lu said.

Cao Cao was initially skeptical about this, but just then, a message arrived from the key city of Hefei, bearing this intelligence: Lu Su, the Dongwu commander overseeing the key point of Lukou (4,3), has died.

So in the novel, this piece of news just popped up out of nowhere and was glossed over so quickly that if you blinked, you might miss it and then find yourself wondering a few chapters from now, “Wait, when did Lu Su die?” But on our podcast, let’s pay Lu Su a little more respect and just pause for a moment of silence to mark this off-screen death for a character who played an important role in the lead-up to Red Cliff and then served as the successor to Zhou Yu and the top commander in all of Dongwu. I think he kind of gets a raw deal in the novel, being depicted as an honorable but somewhat slow-witted sidekick for Zhou Yu and butt of jokes for Zhuge Liang. Maybe I’ll do a short supplemental

episode on him later and ruminate on that point. And oh by the way, I was totally talking through the whole moment of silence we were supposed to be having for Lu Su. Poor guy.

So anyway, once he heard the news about Lu Su's death, Cao Cao was greatly alarmed by the uncanny accuracy of Guan Lu's prediction. Fearing that the second half of that last prediction would also come true, Cao Cao sent men to the region of Hanzhong to see what's going on on the western front. Sure enough, within a few days, an urgent dispatch arrived, telling him that Liu Bei had sent the generals Zhang Fei and Ma Chao to encroach on Hanzhong.

Cao Cao was enraged by this news and wanted to personally lead a huge army back to Hanzhong to lay the smack down on Liu Bei, but Guan Lu said, "Your highness must not make a rash move. The capital Xuchang will suffer a calamity by fire come spring."

Well, since the other things this guy said seem to have come true, Cao Cao decided to not test fate. So he remained at his palace in Yejun while ordering the general Cao Hong to take 50,000 men into the Eastern Riverlands to reinforce the two generals currently overseeing that region -- Xiahou Yuan and Zhang He. Cao Cao then ordered the general Xiahou Dun to lead 30,000 soldiers and make frequent rounds in Xuchang, just in case something happened. He also put one of his senior advisers, a man named Wang (2) Bi (4), in charge of the royal guard.

But his first secretary, Sima Yi, took issue with that last appointment. He told Cao Cao that Wang Bi (4) was too fond of booze and too lax to be in command of the royal guard, but Cao Cao dismissed this concern.

"Wang Bi has followed me through thick and thin," he said. "He is loyal and diligent, a man of iron convictions, more than adequate for the job." And so, he ordered Wang Bi to assume his new post and station the royal guard outside the Eastern Blossom Gate of the capital.

So between the little encounter with Zuo Ci and all this divination business with Guan Lu, we just took an episode's worth of digression into mysticism and superstition. Let's get back to the narrative here. So it's been, what, four episodes since someone made an attempt on Cao Cao's life? Well, that's just too long, so let's have another conspiracy to kill everyone's favorite traitor.

This latest conspiracy was cooked up by a court official named Geng (3) Ji (4). He was the privy treasurer, and he did not like seeing Cao Cao become the King of Wei. So in the first month of the year 218, Geng (3) Ji (4) started whispering to a friend of his. This friend was Wei (4) Huang (2), the security director for Cao Cao. And from there, the conspiracy grew in typical fashion, and they dragged another person into it in the typical fashion, where they first pretend to praise Cao Cao to make the guy angry, just to make sure that he really does have it out for Cao Cao. And then they reveal their secret plot to him.

The guy they looped into their scheme was named Jin (1) Yi (4), and he was a descendant of a former prime minister. More importantly, he was good friends with Wang Bi, the guy that Cao Cao had just put in charge of the royal guard. Jin Yi also brought two other guys into the mix. These two were sons of Ji (1) Ping (2), the former royal physician who, as some of you may remember, was part of the first coup attempt to kill Cao Cao. He tried to poison Cao Cao but failed, and ended up killing himself before his fellow conspirators were all executed. His two sons managed to slip through the net. Now, they've made their way back to the capital in secret, hell bent on seeking revenge, so they were all in the minute they heard there was a new conspiracy in town.

So here's the scheme that the five of them concocted: The 15th day of the first month of the year was a major holiday that was typically celebrated with festive displays of lanterns, and the capital Xuchang would no doubt be rowdy as all. The conspirators were going to use this occasion to make their move.

Geng (3) Ji (2) and Wei (4) Huang (2) were going to lead their own servants and attack the camp of the royal guard. They would kill Wang Bi, the commander of the royal guard, and storm into the palace to secure the emperor. They would then ask the emperor to ascend the Tower of Five Phoenixes, summon all the court officials, and publicly denounce Cao Cao, who, by the way, was not in Xuchang but instead was at his palace in the city of Yejun (4,4). While the emperor is making his denunciation, the two sons of Ji (2) Ping (3) would lead another group of men and charge in from outside the city, start some fires, and spread rumors to make it seem like the whole city was in revolt against Cao Cao. They would then trap the soldiers inside the city until the emperor pardons them in exchange for their obedience. Once the capital is secure, they would then march on Yejun to attack Cao Cao and send word to Liu Bei asking him to meet them there.

Wow, that sounds great. What could possibly go wrong, right? Well, let's just watch how this blows up.

First, the conspirators went about putting together something with a vague resemblance to an army. Geng Ji and Wei Huang each had about 400 servants, so all those guys were now told, "Hey guess what? You're going to pick up a sword and help me overthrow the guy who's been dominating court politics all these years." Meanwhile, the Ji brothers also rounded up 300-some people under the guise of preparing for a hunting expedition.

With all the preparations made, Jin Yi (4) now went to see his friend Wang Bi and told him that hey, with the holiday coming up, we simply MUST put on a huge celebration, what with all the peace that's sweeping across the realm and all. Wang Bi listened to his friend and sent out word to the city's civilians that everyone should go all out with their holiday lanterns this year and enjoy the night of the 15th.

The 15th of the month rolled around, and that night, the sky was clear, and the moon and the stars were trying to outshine each other, as well as all the lanterns dotting the streets of the capital.

While the civilians were having fun, Wang Bi and his officers were also enjoying themselves, feasting away in their camp.

Around 9 p.m., cries suddenly rose up from inside the camp of the royal guard, followed by an urgent report that a fire had broken out in the back of the camp. Wang Bi hurried outside, just in time to see roaring flames accompanied by the cries of battle. He immediately realized that a coup was under way, so he quickly mounted his horse and rode out the south gate, where he promptly ran into Geng Ji, one of the conspirators leading the attack on the camp. Geng Ji took aim with an arrow, and his shot lodged itself in Wang Bi's shoulder, almost knocking him off his horse. Wang Bi, however, managed to stay on his horse and fled toward the west gate, with some rebels in hot pursuit.

Desperate to shake his pursuers, Wang Bi abandoned his horse and fled on foot. He ran toward what he thought was the closest sanctuary -- the home of his good friend, Jin Yi (4). Of course, his good friend happened to be one of the conspirators, and at this moment, he was busy out leading his servants in the uprising. The only people left at home were the womenfolk.

Wang Bi, not knowing any of this, banged on his friend's door. From inside came the voice of his friend's wife, who thought it was her husband coming home.

"Have you killed that scoundrel Wang Bi?" she asked.

Uhh, well, this was a surprise. Wang Bi, was speechless as he came to the stunning realization that his friend had betrayed him. So what's he going to do now? To find out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!