

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

So right before our break for the 100th episode Q&A session, we found Cao Cao stuck in a stalemate against Liu Bei. He knew attacking would not give him victory, but he also didn't want to retreat because Liu Bei would laugh at him. His secretary, Yang Xiu, was clever enough to deduce his master's quandary from the password he handed out for the night watch: Chicken ribs.

Chicken ribs, Yang Xiu explained, had no meat to eat but enough flavor that you didn't want to throw it away, making it a metaphor for Cao Cao's present predicament. So Yang Xiu decided that this meant Cao Cao's heart was not in waging a real war and that he would soon pack up and go home, so Yang Xiu figured he should get a head start on packing. When Cao Cao found out, though, he was enraged and had Yang Xiu executed for spreading rumors that hurt the army's morale.

As I mentioned in episode 92, there was more to this than just chicken ribs. In this supplemental episode, I'm going to tell you about the backstory between Yang Xiu and Cao Cao, which provides a warning in being too clever for your own good.

So one time, while he was still prime minister, Cao Cao went to inspect a garden that his workers had just finished building for him. After making the rounds, Cao Cao did not say a word and simply picked up a brush and wrote the character for "alive" on the door. The workers were all befuddled, but Yang Xiu was all too happy to explain.

"When you put the character for 'alive' inside the character for 'door'," he told them, "it forms the character for 'wide'. His excellency is saying the door is too wide."

So the workers rebuilt the door and asked Cao Cao to come back and take another look. This time, Cao Cao was satisfied, and he asked the workers who had understood his meaning. When they told

him that it was Yang Xiu, Cao Cao outwardly praised his secretary's smarts, but inwardly became wary of the man, because Cao Cao did not like the idea of anyone knowing what's on his mind.

On another occasion, Cao Cao received a box of shortbread from the north, which was considered a delicacy. Cao Cao wrote the characters "One box of shortbread" on the lid and set the box on his desk. Later, while Cao Cao was out, Yang Xiu came in and saw the box. After reading Cao Cao's writing, he had the audacity to open the box and share its contents with others.

When Cao Cao came back and found someone had helped themselves in his absence, he demanded to know why they had, you know, sharked their lord's dessert. Yang Xiu said, "It clearly says on the box, 'Everyone take a bite of shortbread'. So how can we dare to disobey your excellency's command?"

So this was another Chinese play on words, as the characters for "one box" can be broken down into components that also have individual meanings. In this case, those components could be read as "Everyone take a bite." I'll post a visual explanation of this and the other word-play example on the website with this episode, which will help you make sense of this. In any case, Cao Cao laughed this off, but in his mind, Yang Xiu had just earned another strike. I mean, dude, you ate my shortbread.

There's another example of Yang Xiu being too clever for his own good. Cao Cao, unsurprisingly, lived in constant fear that someone would try to assassinate him in his sleep, so he often told his attendants, "I've been known to kill people in my sleep, so when I'm sleeping, keep your distance."

One day, while he was sleeping, Cao Cao's covers fell to the floor. One of his personal attendants quickly went to put it back on him, but suddenly, Cao Cao leaped up from his bed, pulled out his sword, and cut the guy down. He then threw the sword down and went back to sleep. A bit later, he

woke up, looked at the dead body on the ground, and asked, in astonishment, “Who killed my personal attendant?!”

When others told him that it was ... uhh ... you, Cao Cao wept bitterly and ordered that the poor man be given a fancy funeral. In case you haven’t noticed, Cao Cao hands out a lot of fancy funerals. From that day forth, everyone believed that Cao Cao really did kill people in his sleep. Everyone, that is, except Yang Xiu. And of course, he couldn’t bear to just keep it to himself. At the funeral, he pointed at the dead man and sighed, “His excellency wasn’t dreaming; you were.” When word of this got back to Cao Cao, it made him dislike Yang Xiu even more.

Oh and beyond those incidents, Yang Xiu also managed to get himself ensnared in the competition among Cao Cao’s sons for heir apparent status. So earlier in the novel, we briefly mentioned that Cao Cao named his eldest son Cao Pi (1) as heir over his third son, Cao Zhi (2). But it was a tough decision for a while there. Cao Zhi, being a noted writer, loved Yang Xiu’s talent and often held all-night discussions with him. That was ok, but what followed was not.

One time, the eldest son Cao Pi heard that dad was talking about naming younger brother Cao Zhi as heir. Cao Pi didn’t like where this was headed, so he invited a trusted official to his home to discuss how to prevent that from happening. But he also didn’t want people to see this guy going into his home, which would no doubt get back to Cao Cao, since Cao Cao has eyes and ears everywhere. So Cao Pi had the guy hide inside a big box that was typically used to hold bolts of silk and smuggled him in. But Yang Xiu found out about this and spilled it to Cao Cao. So Cao Cao ordered someone to go stand outside Cao Pi’s door to check it out.

When Cao Pi heard what happened, he was in a panick. But the guy he had smuggled in was not. Instead, the guy told him to fill the box with silk and bring it in through the door again the next day.

Cao Pi did as he suggested, and when Cao Cao's man searched the box and saw only silk, he reported back to Cao Cao, who then suspected that Yang Xiu was trying to sully Cao Pi's good name. Needless to say, you really didn't want Cao Cao to think you were lying to him, about his son no less.

For his part, Yang Xiu seemed hell bent on putting himself deeper and deeper into Cao Cao's doghouse. On another occasion, Cao Cao wanted to test the two sons he was considering for heir. So one day, he ordered them to leave the city through a particular gate, but he had secretly instructed the guard at the gate to not let them through. The test was to see how they would react.

Cao Pi was up first, and when the guard told him no, Cao Pi turned back. When Cao Zhi caught wind of this, he consulted Yang Xiu, who told him, "You have been ordered by his highness to go out through the gates. Anyone who stands in your way should be killed." So Cao Zhi went to the gates, where he was stopped by the guard. Cao Zhi promptly said, "I'm acting on orders from his highness; who dares to stop me?" And he cut down the guard right then and there.

So, how did Cao Cao react? Well, he was very impressed by Cao Zhi. Or, he was impressed until he found out that it was Yang Xiu who had told Cao Zhi what to do. Put down another black mark next to Yang Xiu's name in Cao Cao's ledger.

And finally, Yang Xiu ran afoul of Cao Cao on yet another occasion. Cao Cao often asked his sons questions about various subjects to test their knowledge. Yang Xiu helped Cao Zhi cheat by preparing a dozen or so answers for him, and whenever Cao Cao questioned Cao Zhi, the latter would answer eloquently, repeating one of the items from Yang Xiu's cheat sheet. Cao Cao was a little suspicious at how good these supposedly impromptu responses were, but he had no evidence to suggest any foul play.

Well, big brother Cao Pi found out about the cheat sheet and bribed someone to steal it. He then showed it to Cao Cao, who was livid at Yang Xiu for having the audacity to play him. So from that

moment on, Cao Cao was harboring thoughts of doing away with this thorn in his side. So when the chicken ribs thing happened, Yang Xiu finally pushed his luck one too many times, and his head was soon hanging by the gates of Cao Cao's camp.

So there you have it, the backstory of how Yang Xiu got on Cao Cao's hit list by being too in tune with what's on his boss's mind. Usually we don't see that as a bad thing, but when you're serving Cao Cao, well, let's just say it's best to keep your smart-alecky antics to yourself. I hope you enjoyed this supplemental episode, and I'll see you next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.