

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 99.

Last time, Cao Cao was suffering from some really bad headaches. One of his advisers recommended that he seek out the miracle healer Hua Tuo (2), and Cao Cao promptly sent someone to invite the doctor.

After checking Cao Cao's pulse, Hua Tuo said, "Your highness's headaches are caused by a malignant humor inside your skull, where trapped air and fluid are building up. Medicine do you no good. Here is my recommendation: First, I will give you an anesthesia. Then I will use a sharp axe to cut open your skull to release the trapped air and fluid. Only then will the root cause be eliminated."

"Are you trying to kill me?!" Cao Cao said angrily.

"But your highness, have you not heard about how I treated Guan Yu? He had a poison arrow wound on his right arm. I scraped the poison off his bone, and he showed no sign of fear. So what does your highness have to worry about with such a minor ailment?"

"A hurting arm can be scraped, but how a head be split open?!" Cao Cao shot back. "You must be a good friend of Guan Yu's, and you are trying to use this opportunity to avenge him!"

So Cao Cao had his men arrest Hua Tuo and interrogate him under torture. Now, the novel means to portray Cao Cao as paranoid here, but in all honesty, if I was living in third-century China, I would probably have a similar reaction to somebody proposing to take an axe to my skull. One of Cao Cao's advisers tried to talk him into letting Hua Tuo go, since he's such a rare talent. But Cao Cao was like, no way. And instead he ordered his men to ratchet up the torture.

While Hua Tuo was rotting in prison, one of his jailors was a big fan of his and treated him to wine and food each day. Hua Tuo was grateful for his kindness and told him, "I'm going to die soon. My one regret is that my medical text, the Book of the Black Bag, will be lost to posterity. I have no way to

repay your kindness, so I have written a letter. You can send someone to deliver it to my family, and they will give you the book and you may carry on my craft.”

The jailer was delighted. “If I get that book, I will quit this job and dedicate myself to healing the sick so as to spread your virtue,” he said.

So Hua Tuo wrote the letter and the jailer took it to the doctor’s hometown, found his family, and got the book from Hua Tuo’s wife. He brought it back to prison to show Hua Tuo, who then officially bestowed the book to him. The jailer took the book home and hid it.

Ten days later, true to his word, Hua Tuo died in his jail cell. The jailer arranged for his funeral, then quit his job and went home, ready to dive into the medical text and soak up Hua Tuo’s knowledge. But when he got home, he found his wife burning the book. By the time the stunned jailer managed to snatch it out of her hands, the book had been reduced to ashes except for a couple pages.

The jailer angrily cursed his wife, but she told him, “Even if you manage to become as good as Hua Tuo, you would just end up dying in a jail cell, so what’s the use of keeping this around?”

And that, supposedly, is why Hua Tuo’s amazing medical techniques of cutting into people with minimal anesthesia and making them puke up worms did not get passed down through the ages. The only things that did survive were a few first-year-med-school-level remedies on the two pages that did not get burned.

Meanwhile, after Hua Tuo’s death, Cao Cao’s condition continued to deteriorate. At the same time, the political situation with Dongwu and Shu was weighing on his mind as well. Around this time, an envoy from Dongwu arrived with a message, which said:

“I, your subject Sun Quan, have long known that the mandate of heaven belongs to your highness. I eagerly await the day when you ascend to the imperial throne. If you would send your generals to

crush Liu Bei and pacify the Riverlands, then I shall lead my subordinates and offer our land to you in submission.”

When he read this, Cao Cao laughed out loud, showed the letter to his staff, and told them, “That bastard wants to put me over the fire!”

Now, there are actually two meanings in this. One is that Sun Quan was trying to put Cao Cao in a precarious situation, metaphorically over a fire. As to what situation that would be, that brings us to the second meaning, and this meaning lies in the symbolism of fire. Different dynasties and ruling houses have different symbols, kind of like the sigils of the different houses in Game of Thrones. The symbol for the House of Han happens to be fire, so in saying that Sun Quan wants to put him over the fire, Cao Cao is saying that Sun Quan is asking him to put himself above the House of Han, i.e., declare himself emperor, thus placing him in a situation where he would bear the sting of being branded a usurper.

But fire or not, a bunch of Cao Cao’s officials now piled on and said, “The House of Han has long been feeble. Your highness possesses immense accomplishments and virtue. All the people admire you. Right now Sun Quan is declaring himself your subject. This is a sign of approval from heaven. Your highness should act in accordance with the will of heaven and the people and ascend to the imperial throne.”

But Cao Cao laughed off that suggestion once again.

“In my many years of service to the Han, even though some of my merits may have benefited the people, I have already attained the title of king. In reputation and rank, I have reached the top. How can I dare to wish for more? If the mandate of heaven really does rest with me, then let me be King Wen (2) of Zhou (1).”

So let's take a quick detour to explain what Cao Cao means here. He's comparing himself to King Wen, the founder of the Zhou (1) Dynasty, the first great dynasty in Chinese history, which lasted about 800 years. But the thing that's relevant here is that King Wen was actually never officially king of a dynasty in his lifetime. Even though he had control of most of the empire, he refused to overthrow the old ruling house and instead remained its vassal, at least technically. It was left to his son to take the final step and officially overthrow the old ruling house and start the Zhou Dynasty. Once that was done, the son then posthumously declared the father the dynasty's first king. This all worked out well because King Wen managed to avoid accusations of usurpation. In fact, he's praised for his virtue in remaining "loyal" to his lord. But he also gets the honor of being king, albeit posthumously.

So that's what Cao Cao was hinting at here to his group of officials. It's not that he didn't want his own house to replace the Han, but because he has been a vassal of the Han for so long, he did not want to get slapped with the label of usurper. So he'll leave that to his son, and of course, all of his loyal officials are supposed to help make that happen.

One of those loyal officials, Sima Yi, now suggested that Cao Cao reward Sun Quan with a rank and order him to resist Liu Bei. Cao Cao agreed and heaped a generalship, a marquiship, and the inspectorship of Jing Province on Sun Quan.

But this did nothing for Cao Cao's illness as he continued to get worse. One night, he dreamed that he saw three horses eating out of the same trough. When he awoke, he said to the adviser Jia (2) Xu (3), "Once before I dreamed about three horses eating from the same trough and suspected that it was an omen that there would be trouble from Ma Teng and his sons. Ma Teng is dead now; yet last night I had the same dream again. What do you think it means?"

So hold on. Why would Cao Cao think a dream about horses had anything to do with Ma Teng, the general who tried, unsuccessfully, to assassinate him? Well, in Chinese, the character for Ma Teng's last name, Ma, is also the character for horse. Also, the character for trough sounds the same as the character for Cao (2). So again we're having a little fun with homonyms here, as horses eating from a trough is taken to mean Ma Teng causing trouble for Cao Cao. But as Cao Cao said, Ma Teng and a couple of his sons were already dead, so why was he dreaming about horses now? There isn't another Ma family father-son trio in the novel.

"They are horses of fortune, a good sign," Jia Xu said. "The dream is showing horses of fortune belonging to the house of Cao, so your highness has no reason for concern."

And so Cao Cao had no concerns, but little did he know that this was a piece of foreshadowing by the author. It'll take us a while to see the omen in this dream be fulfilled, but when it does, we'll all go "aaahh".

Anyway, the next night, Cao Cao was sleeping when, around midnight, he felt dizzy. So he got out of bed and leaned against a low table to rest. Suddenly, he heard something that sounded like the tearing of cloth. A surprised Cao Cao looked over in the direction of the sound and saw 20-some figures covered in blood, standing in the gloom, and calling for his life in muted voices. These were some of the numerous people Cao Cao had killed over the years. There was Empress Fu, Consort Dong, two young princes, Dong Cheng, and so on.

In a panic, Cao Cao pulled out his sword and swung at these old enemies, hitting nothing but air. Suddenly, there was a loud crash as the southwest corner of the building caved in, sending Cao Cao tumbling to the floor. Fortunately for him, his attendants managed to rescue him and moved him to another palace. But the next night, Cao Cao again heard an endless stream of men and women crying coming from outside.

When morning came, Cao Cao summoned his corps of officials and asked them, "I have spent 30-some years in war and had never experienced nor believed in the supernatural, but why are these things happening now?"

"Your highness should summon priests to perform rituals to ward off evil," his officials told him.

"[Sigh] As the sage Confucius said, when you give offense to heaven, to whom can you pray?" Cao Cao said with a sigh. "My life is at an end; there is no saving me."

The next day, Cao Cao felt a pounding in his head, and his eyes could no longer make out anything. He hurriedly summoned his old kinsman Xiahou Dun. But when Xiahou Dun arrived at the palace gates, he suddenly saw all the ghosts of Cao Cao's dead enemies, which freaked him out so much that Xiahou Dun fainted and had to be carried off. From that point on, Xiahou Dun fell ill.

With Xiahou Dun MIA, Cao Cao now summoned his next most senior officials to his bedside, including the general Cao Hong and the advisers Chen (2) Qun (2), Jia (2) Xu (3), and Sima Yi.

"Your highness, please take good care of your precious self; you will recover in no time," they told him.

"I have crisscrossed the realm for 30-some years," Cao Cao said. "All the other heroes have been vanquished except for Sun Quan and Liu Bei. I am nearing my death and can no longer be with you, so I must entrust my family affairs to you.

"My first son Cao (2) Ang (2), born to my first wife, was killed years ago. My second wife bore me four sons: Cao Pi (1), Cao Zhang (1), Cao Zhi (2), and Cao Xiong (2). My favorite is the third son, Cao Zhi (2), but he is vain and insincere, overindulgent in wine and too unrestrained in action. Thus I could not make him my heir. My second son Cao Zhang is all brawn and no brain. My fourth son Cao Xiong is

sickly and unlikely to live long. Only the eldest, Cao Pi, who is reliable, generous, respectful to others, and scrupulous in word and deed, is capable of continuing my enterprise. Please serve him well.”

The group of senior officials accepted their lord’s command with tears in their eyes and took their leave. Cao Cao then ordered an attendant to fetch the rare incenses and perfumes that he had collected over the years and distributed them among the women in his harem, along with these instructions:

“After I die, you all should devote yourselves to needlework. Make plenty of silk shoes, and you will be able to sell them and live off that income.”

So here’s one of those points that the novel just glosses right over in the course of the narrative, but I think it’s worth dwelling on for just a minute. Cao Cao, at this point, was basically emperor in all but name, and yet here he was, telling his wives that they needed to make a living by stitching shoes after he’s gone. Now, I’m guessing these women probably were not in danger of starving after Cao Cao is gone, but it does say something that he was not letting them just cruise along in a life of luxury.

From some of the information I have found about the real-life Cao Cao, he was apparently a pretty frugal guy when it came to soft living, running counter to the extravagant style of the court during the late Eastern Han Dynasty. Even the wife who bore him four sons once remarked on how frugal her own living conditions were and how she and her personal staff knew better than to expect fancy gifts or excessive amounts of food. So perhaps his parting instructions were a reflection of Cao Cao the fiscally responsible statesman.

Anyway, after telling his wives they have to earn their living after he’s gone, Cao Cao then commanded many of them to reside at his pleasure palace, the Bronze Bird Tower, and keep up daily offerings to his spirit and perform ceremonies with music and female performers, so as to make sure that he’s sufficiently nourished and entertained in the afterlife.

And now came his final command: Outside the city of Zhangde (1,2), dig 72 fake graves.

“Do not let people know where I am buried,” he told his men, “so that no one will dig up my body.”

After he spoke those words, Cao Cao let out a long sigh, accompanied by countless tears. Shortly thereafter, he breathed his last at the age of 66, in the year 220.

So it goes without saying that we’re going to do a supplemental episode to send Cao Cao off in style, but for now, let’s remember him with this poem:

From Yejun, the city on the River Zhang (1),

Was sure to come a greatly gifted man:

In war, a poet, or an artist skilled.

Perchance a model minister, or son,

Or famous for fraternal duty shown.

The hero who transcends the common scope

Can’t tailor his career to please the world.

High merit and great evil -- from a single hand,

Fair honors with foulest crime conjoined.

In letters, divine powers; as hegemon, great force --

Could he tamely blend among the mass?

Takes he the field, then is he bold in fight;

Would he a mansion build, a palace springs.

Here was a man to challenge all tradition!

First he rose to hegemon, then to king.

But in decline he wept as any child.
He can fight no more; fate ordains his lot.
Turning to his womenfolk, he has no hope of help.
Doling out the rare perfumes -- call him not unking.
Alas! Great men of old took care in every deed;
Deserted or in pomp, their purposes held firm.
The pedant lightly speaks about the dead;
From the grave they mock his pedant's airs.

So in the course of a little more than two episodes, we have killed off two major characters, Guan Yu and Cao Cao. Rest assured, they will NOT be the last. The dying is just getting started. Stay tuned.

But for now, there's the matter of Cao Cao's funeral and succession. All of his officials went into mourning, and word of his death was quickly sent to his four sons. The officials placed Cao Cao's body in a golden coffin with a silver outer casing and escorted it toward the city of Yejun (4,4), where his eldest son Cao Pi was located. When Cao Pi heard that his father had died, he wailed and led his officials several miles out of the city, where they kneeled along the roadside to greet Cao Cao's coffin and escort it inside the city, where it was placed in a side chamber of the palace. The officials all donned mourning clothes and wept bitterly in the main hall.

But just then, one man stood up and said to Cao Pi, "Let the heir apparent grieve no more. There is important business to attend to."

This was Sima Fu (2), the attendant to the heir apparent, and he continued, "The King of Wei has passed, and the realm is shaken. We must elevate his successor as soon as possible so as to calm the people's hearts. Why are you all standing around crying?"

"But without a decree from the emperor, how can we proceed?" the other officials said.

However, Chen Jiao (3), the minister of war, told them, “The king died away from the capital. If his sons fight over succession, there could be dissent, and the house itself might crumble.”

As he spoke, Chen Jiao (3) pulled out his sword and sliced off a piece of his sleeve, declaring, “Let us ask the heir apparent to assume the throne today! If anyone dares to disagree, they will end up like my robe.”

Well, since he put it that way, nobody was going to say no. And just then, the official Hua (2) Xin (1) arrived from the capital Xuchang. Everyone was surprised and asked what he was doing there. Hua Xin told them, “The King of Wei has passed, and the realm trembles. We must ask the heir apparent to assume his throne.”

“We haven’t received a decree from the emperor,” they told him. “So we’ve been discussing asking the late king’s wife, Lady Bian (4), to issue a decree to install the heir apparent as king.”

“I have already wrangled a decree from the emperor; it’s right here,” Hua Xin said, rendering the whole issue moot.

Everyone leaped for joy at that news. Hua Xin now pulled out the decree and read it out loud. So it turns out that Hua Xin, a rather fawning follower of Cao Cao’s, had foreseen this need, so he forced the emperor to write this decree, naming Cao Pi as the new King of Wei, as well as the prime minister and the imperial inspector of Ji (4) Province, basically assuming all the titles and ranks his father had held. Cao Pi wasted no time as he donned his new title that day and threw a big party to celebrate.

In the midst of this celebration, however, they got word that Cao Pi’s second brother Cao Zhang was coming this way with an army of 100,000. This sent Cao Pi into a panic. Cao Zhang, remember, was the fighter in the family.

“My yellow-bearded brother has always been willful, and he is a great warrior,” Cao Pi said to his officials. “Since he is coming from so far away with an army, he must be here to fight for the throne. What should we do?”

One man stepped forward and said, “Allow me to go see him, and I will deter him with but a few words.”

This man was Jia (3) Kui (2), imperial officer first grade. So Cao Pi sent Jia Kui (2) on his mission. When Jia Kui met Cao Zhang outside the city, Cao Zhang asked him, “Where is the late king’s seal?”

But Jia Kui answered sternly, “Every family has its eldest son, and every state its appointed heir. The late king’s seal is not something that you should be asking about.”

This rebuke silenced Cao Zhang, who never did possess the quickest wit anyway. So he and Jia Kui entered the city together. Standing in front of the palace, Jia Kui asked Cao Zhang, “Has your lordship come to attend the funeral? Or are you here to challenge the succession?”

“I have come for the funeral, nothing else,” Cao Zhang answered.

“In that case, why are you bringing troops into the city?” Jia Kui asked.

To show his sincerity, Cao Zhang immediately dismissed his guards and entered the palace alone to pay his respects to his brother. When the two brothers met, they embraced and wept. After they were done crying, Cao Zhang handed over to Cao Pi command of the army that he had brought, and Cao Pi ordered Cao Zhang to return to his post in the city of Changan, whereupon Cao Zhang took his leave.

Having neutralized the biggest potential threat to his authority, Cao Pi now sat secure on his throne. He promoted the officials Jia Xu, Hua Xin, and Wang (2) Lang (2) to high positions while giving out appropriate promotions and rewards to everyone else in his court. He also gave his father the posthumous title of King Wu (3), or the Martial King, and buried him at Yejun.

Now, they needed somebody to watch over Cao Cao's tomb, and Cao Pi gave that job to Yu (1) Jin (4), the disgraced general who had been captured by Guan Yu but was later freed by Sun Quan and returned to Wei. When Yu Jin arrived at his new posting, he saw that on one of the white walls of the crypt was a painting of Guan Yu drowning his army and capturing him alive. The painting depicted Guan Yu sitting sternly while the angry Wei general Pang De stood, unyielding to the last. Yu Jin was also in this painting, but he was depicted as cowering on the ground, surrendering and begging for mercy.

So as it turns out, Cao Pi had much contempt and disdain for Yu Jin ever since that depicted battle because Yu Jin, instead of remaining true to his lord and dying a loyal death, surrendered and lucked into regaining his freedom. So Cao Pi had the painting drawn on the wall of the crypt and sent Yu Jin there so that he could see it and be shamed. Well, it worked. Yu Jin was humiliated and irate, so irate in fact, that he fell ill and soon died. Someone later wrote these lines about him:

Thirty years bespeak a friendship rare;
But facing death, Yu Jin proved disloyal.
Cao Cao never saw into his heart.
To paint a tiger, the bones are where to start.

Yu Jin may be dead, but Cao Pi was not done settling old scores yet. The official Hua Xin now told him, "Your second brother Cao Zhang may have given up his army and returned to his post, but the other two brothers, Cao Zhi (2) and Cao Xiong (2), dared to skip the funeral. We must punish them."

Cao Pi agreed and sent envoys to both of those two brothers to admonish them. Within a day, one of the envoys returned and said that Cao Xiong, the youngest brother, was so fearful of his crime

that he hanged himself. Showing that he had learned well from his father, Cao Pi ordered that Cao Xiong be given a fancy funeral.

Another day passed, and the envoy sent to Cao Zhi returned, and his was a totally different story.

“His lordship spent all day drinking with the Ding (1) brothers,” the envoy said. “They were rude and disrespectful. When they heard that I had arrived, his lordship remained seated, while one of the Ding brothers said, ‘The late king originally wanted to make my lord his heir, but he was deterred by corrupt officials. And now, his highness has just passed. Why is the new king in such a hurry to admonish his own kin?’ The other Ding brother then chimed in, ‘My master’s intelligence eclipses the world and deserves the throne, and yet he has been denied. A courier like you is too blind to recognize such a talent.’ That riled up his lordship, and he had the guards beat me and kick me out.”

Cao Pi was incensed when he heard this, so he immediately ordered the general Xu Chu to lead 3,000 of his personal Tiger Guard to arrest Cao Zhi and his 1,000 closest friends. So I guess if you ever accepted a Facebook friend request from the guy, you were in trouble. When Xu Chu arrived at his destination, the guards tried to stop him, but Xu Chu cut them down where they stood. After that, no one dared to get in Mad Tiger’s way as he stormed into the city and went to Cao Zhi’s residence. There, he found Cao Zhi and his entourage passed out drunk. Xu Chu had them all tied up and loaded onto carts. He then arrested all the officials in the city and took them all back to Yejun for Cao Pi to deal with.

Cao Pi wasted no time, ordering that Cao Zhi’s entourage all be executed. Among this group were many talented scholars and writers, since Cao Zhi himself was a talented scholar and attracted like minds, so this was a great blow to the literati of the time.

When it came to dealing with Cao Zhi, however, Cao Pi ran into some problems. Their mother, Lady Bian (4), was already heartbroken when she heard that her youngest son, Cao Xiong, had hanged

himself. And now, her third son had been arrested and his entourage executed. When she got that news, Lady Bian rushed over to see Cao Pi, who hurriedly greeted her.

“Your brother Cao Zhi is prone to drinking and acting out,” Lady Bian said to her son as she wept. “He thinks too highly of his own talent and thus acts without restraint. For the sake of your familial bond, please spare him. Only then can I die in peace.”

“Mother, I am fond of brother’s talent as well; how can I bear to harm him?” Cao Pi said. “I’m just trying to curb his temper. Please do not worry.”

To see how Cao Pi intends to “curb his brother’s temper,” tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!