

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

In this episode, we're going to bid farewell to one of the novel's major characters as we close the book on Guan Yu, who lost his territory and his head in episode 97. As I have done in the past when a major character exits the narrative, I'm going to cover some of the similarities and differences between Guan Yu the fictional character and Guan Yu the historical figure. This is no easy task, since so much of his real life has receded into the background, overshadowed by the fictionalized version. There's a lot to unwind here, so let's just start from the beginning.

And right at the beginning is where we have our first major discrepancy between history and fiction. So you know all that talk about the oath of brotherhood in the peach orchard between Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei? Well, there's nothing in the historical records that indicates this oath actually happened. Now, according to the Records of the Three Kingdoms, the historical text on which the novel is based, the three of them were close *like* brothers. For instance, in episode 2, the novel talked about how the three of them slept in the same bed, and when Liu Bei was sitting in public, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei would stand next to him all day long. All of that came straight from the Records of the Three Kingdoms. But there is no mention in the historical records about the three of them actually pledging an oath to *be* brothers. But you know, it's a small leap from "like brothers" to "actually brothers" to being the benchmark by which all fraternal bonds are measured.

Moving on, let's go to one of the legendary incidents in the novel where Guan Yu first made his name. In episode 7, Liu Bei and company were part of a massive campaign by a coalition of warlords against the villainous prime minister Dong Zhuo. One of Dong Zhuo's generals, Hua (4) Xiong (2), was proving to be quite a handful for the coalition forces. That is, until Guan Yu went out and took care of him. As the story went, they poured Guan Yu a cup of wine before he went out to fight Hua (4) Xiong

(2), but he told them to just hold on to it and that he'd be right back. Then, moments later, he returned with Hua Xiong's head in tow, and it took so little time that the cup of wine was still warm.

If this sounded too good to be true, that's because it is. In fact, Guan Yu wasn't even the one who killed Hua Xiong. That honor was left to the forces led by Sun Jian (1), the guy who eventually started the Sun family's empire in the Southlands. According to the historical records, Sun Jian lost a fight against Dong Zhuo, but then he rallied his troops and pulled victory from the jaws of defeat, killing Hua Xiong in the process. There wasn't even any mention of Guan Yu being on the scene.

One guy that Guan Yu did kill, both in the novel and in real life, was Yan Liang, who was the warlord Yuan Shao's top general. This happened during that brief time when Guan Yu was in Cao Cao's service. According to the Records of the Three Kingdoms, Cao Cao sent Guan Yu and the general Zhang Liao to lift the siege that Yan Liang was leading on one of Cao Cao's cities. Guan Yu saw Yan Liang's canopy from a distance, so he rode through a sea of enemy soldiers and cut down Yan Liang and brought his head back, thus lifting the siege. That prompted Cao Cao to give him the title of the Marquis of Hanshou (4,4) District.

And since we're on the topic, let's talk about Guan Yu and Cao Cao. Their relationship is one of the more interesting aspects of the novel, where Guan Yu steadfastly remained loyal to Liu Bei while Cao Cao, out of admiration for his talents, willingly accepted this loyalty in sparing Guan Yu's life and treats him with tremendous generosity in an attempt to woo him. And then in the end, when Guan Yu did in fact leave Cao Cao's service, Cao Cao not only did not try to stop him, but went out of his way to see him off and then sent one messenger after another to ensure Guan Yu had safe passage through all the checkpoints -- AFTER Guan Yu had already ran a few of them and killed a handful of Cao Cao's officers in the process.

So how much of that is real? Now, I've mentioned in the narrative that Guan Yu's journey through five checkpoints on his way to rejoining Liu Bei was most likely apocryphal. Aside from that, however, a surprising portion of this story is true. According to the historical texts, Cao Cao did indeed capture Guan Yu after defeating Liu Bei one time. Guan Yu surrendered to Cao Cao, but there is no mention of any agreed-upon conditions for his surrender, but the records were pretty clear that Guan Yu didn't exactly hide his plans to eventually rejoin Liu Bei, so maybe there was an understanding between him and Cao Cao about that. Also, whereas in the novel Guan Yu had Liu Bei's wives under his protection and that was one of the key reasons for his surrendering to Cao Cao, there is no mention of this in the historical records. Cao Cao gave Guan Yu a generalship and treated him well, but he also knew that Guan Yu's heart was not in staying.

There's a scene in episode 32 where Cao Cao sent the general Zhang Liao to see why Guan Yu was so hell bent on leaving, and Guan Yu basically told Zhang Liao that nothing could trump his relationship with Liu Bei. That's actually pretty close to what is described in the historical records. When Zhang Liao went to sound out the real-life Guan Yu, Guan Yu sighed and said, "I am aware that Lord Cao has treated me very well. But I have received tremendous kindness from General Liu, and we have sworn to die together. I must not turn my back on that. I will leave eventually. Once I render some service to repay Lord Cao, I shall go."

When this got back to Cao Cao, he was impressed by Guan Yu's honor. And when Guan Yu rendered service by killing Yan Liang, Cao Cao figured Guan Yu was a short-timer, so Cao Cao tried to keep him by lavishing handsome rewards on him. But just like in the novel, Guan Yu was not moved. He sealed up all the riches Cao Cao had given him and hung his seal of command in his house, and then wrote a letter to Cao Cao to bid him goodbye. Cao Cao's officers wanted to give chase, but Cao Cao told them to let it go. So both in the novel and in real life, Cao Cao demonstrated a rather impressive sense of honor and tremendous admiration for Guan Yu.

While we're talking about Cao Cao and Guan Yu, I want to pass along an interesting little tidbit from the historical records neither honor nor admiration was on display. Before Liu Bei turned against Cao Cao, the two of them, along with Guan Yu, joined forces to defeat the mighty warrior Lü Bu. Apparently Guan Yu knew one of Lü Bu's officers and had the hots for the man's wife. So as they were laying siege to Lü Bu's last foothold, Guan Yu went to Cao Cao and said, hey my wife hasn't been able to give me a child. When we sack the city, can I have that officer's wife for myself? To that, Cao Cao said sure. But then, after the city fell, Guan Yu asked Cao Cao again and again, and all this pestering made Cao Cao think, hmm, maybe there's something special about this woman. So he got a look at the woman, and guess what? He liked her. He really liked her. He liked her so much that he kept her for himself. And Guan Yu, as you can imagine, was not pleased about this at all. Alas, there's no information about what, if anything, came from this.

Now let's move on to some stuff about Guan Yu from later on in the novel. So you know that cringe-inducing scene in the novel where he told Hua (4) Tuo (2), the miracle healer, to scrape the poison from his arm? Well, something like that actually happened. At some point in his life, Guan Yu took an arrow to the left arm. The wound healed, but not quite properly, and apparently whenever it rained, his arm would ache. A doctor -- we don't know who -- told him that he had been struck by a poison arrow and that the poison had reached the bone and needed to be scraped off. Well, just like in the novel, Guan Yu just stuck his arm out and told the doctor to begin, like he was just getting a flu shot or something. While that was going on and his blood was filling up a basin, he was casually feasting with his officers and having a good ol' time. So, umm, kudos to him, I guess.

While incidents like these from the historical records bear out the positive traits of Guan Yu, like his sense of honor and his beserker streak of courage, we also see real-life examples of his pride,

which eventually contributed to his downfall. According to the Records of the Three Kingdoms, when the general Ma Chao surrendered to Liu Bei, Guan Yu sent Zhuge Liang a letter to ask whom Ma Chao's skills stacked up against -- a not so concealed attempt at fishing for a compliment. Zhuge Liang, wisely, wrote back and said Ma Chao was a match for Zhang Fei, but cannot compare to you, of course. And that appeased Guan Yu, just like in the novel.

Another example of Guan Yu's arrogance came when Sun Quan tried to arrange for a marriage between his son and Guan Yu's daughter. Just like in the novel, Guan Yu not only refused, but verbally insulted Sun Quan's envoy, which ticked off Sun Quan something fierce and helped set the stage for Sun Quan to attack Guan Yu while the latter was distracted.

Guan Yu's real-life demise occurred pretty close to the way it was described in the novel. While Guan Yu was busy attacking Cao Cao's cities, Sun Quan's general Lü Meng disguised his troops as merchants and launched a sneak attack on his home territory. That, combined, with defections by a couple of Guan Yu's officers, led to his downfall. When Guan Yu was captured, Sun Quan did indeed contemplate keeping him around, but then was reminded of what happened when Cao Cao tried that approach, so Sun Quan said, ok, off with his head. But in death, Guan Yu had the distinction of being buried in three places. Sun Quan sent his head to Cao Cao, who buried it outside the city of Luoyang (4,2). Sun Quan, meanwhile, buried Guan Yu's body at the city of Dangyang (1,2). Then, when Liu Bei got word of Guan Yu's demise, he also constructed a tomb for him, or more accurately, for a set of his clothes, in the city of Chengdu, to bring his spirit home. That provided the basis for a common saying that Guan Yu lay with his head in Luoyang, his body at Dangyang, and his spirit west of the mountains, aka in Chengdu.

So that wrapped up the life of Guan Yu the man. But Guan Yu the legend was just starting to gain a life of its own. I think his reputation has benefited more from the novel than anyone except Liu Bei

and Zhuge Liang. He is held up as a paragon of honor and courage. As early as the late sixth century, so about 350 years after he died, Guan Yu was being worshipped as a god. You can still find temples to him throughout China and other Asian countries that have been heavily influenced by Chinese culture, and you'll find little Guan Yu statues in many a Chinese household. You'll even find them in Hong Kong police stations.

But what exactly are people worshipping Guan Yu as? Well, that depends on what religion you're talking about. He's been worshipped as a local Chinese deity, while Daoists treat him as, among other things, a guardian deity. Within Buddhist circles, he's also worshipped as a bodhisattva, someone who is at a stage of enlightenment where they have the ability to reach nirvana, but they have chosen to delay taking that final step out of compassion so that they can save suffering mortal beings. And the thing is, all these roles are not necessarily distinct from one another, since the Chinese have a long tradition of mixing aspects of various religions, so many people just offer a prayer to Guan Yu for general-purpose blessings.

Given Guan Yu's prowess as a warrior, it's no surprise that he's also been seen as a god of war, something that persists even till today, especially in the West. His divine assistance has been cited by various parties throughout history as a reason for their triumph. For instance, in the 14th century, the founding emperor of the Ming (2) Dynasty claimed that Guan Yu's spirit helped him at a key battle, I guess kind of like how the Roman emperor Constantine conquered in the sign of Christ. Years later, another Ming Dynasty emperor would also claim that Guan Yu helped him in overthrowing his nephew and taking the throne, because apparently the god of war is a party to coup d'états. In the 16th century, Guan Yu helped turn back a Japanese invasion of Korea. And after the Manchus conquered China and founded the Qing Dynasty, they also claimed to have Guan Yu on their side, because Guan Yu apparently helps foreign invaders conquer his native land.

Aside from his elevation to godhood, Guan Yu remains a key part of Chinese culture in part also because he has one of the most distinct and widely recognized appearances of all the figures in Chinese history and literature. Any time a Chinese person sees a depiction of someone with a red face and long beard, there is no doubt whom we're talking about. His weapon, the Green Dragon Saber, has also become uniquely his, kind of like when you retire a great athlete's number and it becomes forever associated with that player.

Personally, I think Guan Yu comes off as an over-the-top character whose fictional depiction papers over a flawed man whose arrogance and carelessness cost his master a key piece of prime real estate. Still, there is no denying that Guan Yu was and still is one of the most indelible characters in Chinese literature and history, and he will no doubt remain an icon and a symbol for centuries to come.

And that's wrap for our supplemental episode on the life, afterlife, and fictional life of Guan Yu. I'll see you next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!