

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

So this is a big one, both in length and significance. We're going to bid farewell to Cao Cao, our favorite villain or, if you prefer, Machiavellian anti-hero. He is, by far, the most consequential character to leave our narrative thus far. Given his importance in the novel and in Chinese history and culture, I am going to do something more than just run down a series of differences between the real-life Cao Cao and the fictional Cao Cao. Instead, I am going to give a more detailed accounting of the historical Cao Cao's life and career, point out some similarities and differences with the novel along the way, and then talk about his historical and cultural legacy.

Cao Cao was born in the year 155, which would put him at about 29 or 30 years old at the start of the novel, which began with the outbreak of the Yellow Turban Rebellion in the year 184. He was born in the county of Qiao (2), which is located in the northwestern part of present-day Anhui (1,4) Province, which lies in the mid-eastern part of present-day China. In addition to Cao Cao, this area also produced a couple other notable people. One was Hua (2) Tuo (2), the renowned physician who lived around the same time as Cao Cao and, like in the novel, died by Cao Cao's hand. The other notable person from this area was Hua (1) Mulan (4,2), the basis for the Chinese legend that eventually became the Disney movie Mulan. I'm still waiting for the Disney movie on Cao Cao, by the way.

As we have mentioned in the podcast, Cao Cao's father was originally not named Cao, but rather Xiahou, but then he changed his last name after being adopted by Cao Teng (2), one of the powerful eunuchs in the Han court. This connection probably both helped and hurt Cao Cao in his career because while on the one hand having an influential eunuch for a connection probably opened some doors, it also likely made it a lot harder for Cao Cao to gain real respect from the high-level court officials, who came from distinguished families and despised eunuchs.

Cao Cao got his start in government at the age of 20 when he was appointed a district captain of Luoyang, the imperial capital of the Eastern Han Dynasty. Just as the novel described, he was apparently a hardass when it came to enforcing the law. He once had a relative of a powerful eunuch flogged to death because the man broke curfew and was walking the streets at night. Now this may sound rather harsh, but the law was the law, so Cao Cao was in the clear. Even though he had obviously offended someone powerful, with the law on his side and his own powerful backer, the aggrieved eunuch could do him no harm. So instead, the eunuch just got him promoted away from Luoyang so as not to have to deal with him anymore. And that is how Cao Cao became governor of the county of Dunqiu (4,1) at the age of 22.

So it seemed like Cao Cao was on the fast track to success, but after about a year in his new post, he hit a snag. He had some very distant family connection to the empress at the time, but the empress became entangled in palace intrigue and was accused of witchcraft, causing the emperor to dump her. With her fall, many who were connected to her also took a tumble, including Cao Cao, who was dismissed from his post.

Cao Cao remained in the political wilderness for a couple years before being recalled in 180 to serve as a consultant in the Han court. While in that position, he tried to warn the emperor against, ironically, the accruing power of the eunuchs, but he did not find a receptive audience.

Now, skip ahead four years, and we have the outbreak of the Yellow Turban Rebellion. This was where Cao Cao really began his military career. He was named Captain of the Cavalry and sent into the field to deal with the rebels in one part of the country. He did a good job and was rewarded with a promotion and a transfer to another region to keep the rebels there in check. In his new position, Cao Cao launched an aggressive campaign of suppressing unsanctioned religions. So why would he do that? Well, consider that the Yellow Turban Rebellion was led by members of Daoist sects. So putting

down rogue religions was probably a way to smack down potential fifth columnists. Cao Cao's policies really brought the hammer down on local cults while lending strong support to state-sanctioned Confucianism. He even went so far as to destroy local shrines.

These policies were effective in rooting out the rebellion in the region, as it was said that all the unsavory elements fled to other areas. But, Cao Cao's actions also had the unintended but perhaps totally predictable consequence of ticking off many of the leading local families. I mean, dude, you were smashing their shrines. Running afoul of the local elites was a dangerous thing to do at a time when politics were centered around local elites. Fearing for his family's safety, Cao Cao turned down a promotion and returned home on the excuse of being sick. So here he suffered another setback in his career.

Around the same time he went into retirement, Cao Cao was approached by the imperial protector of Ji (4) Province about joining a little conspiracy to overthrow the sitting emperor and put another member of the imperial house on the throne. Cao Cao stayed out of this conspiracy, and that was a good thing, because the whole operation soon fell apart and the guy who drew up the scheme ended up killing himself.

Cao Cao's latest retirement lasted about 18 months, after which he again returned to Luoyang and was given a position that was basically the fourth out of eight heads of a newly formed imperial army. That sounds like a nice gig, but this army only lasted a year and never saw much action before being disbanded. Oh, and things were about to REALLY hit the fan.

So everything we've covered up to this point gets us to about episode 3 in the novel. It was the year 189, and Emperor Ling (2) had died and was succeeded by his eldest son. Cao Cao was serving under the young emperor's regent, He (2) Jin (4). This He Jin, as the novel told us, planned to do away

with the eunuchs who held immense power behind the scenes, but the eunuchs found out about this, and they got to him before he could get to them. But the minute He Jin's head hit the ground, his loyal officers rose up in a violent revolt against the eunuchs. The chaos that ensued in the capital consumed the eunuchs, but also created an opening for an outsider, the warlord Dong (3) Zhuo (2), to step in, take power at court, and place his own puppet emperor on the throne. This puppet turned out to be Emperor Xian (4), who would last for quite a while but would also turn out to be the last emperor of the Han dynasty.

Dong Zhuo offered Cao Cao a job in his new regime, but Cao Cao had a bad feeling about this and turned it down. I mean, who wants to work for a bloodthirsty, brutish tyrant intent on demolishing the government? Worried that declining the job would bring trouble, he changed his name and slipped out of Luoyang, fleeing back to his home in the city of Chenliu (2,2), which lay to the southeast of the capital. So in real life, there was no dramatic attempt by Cao Cao on Dong Zhuo's life that turned into a "hey look at this cool knife I got you" gesture.

But according to a couple sources in the Records of the Three Kingdoms, on his flight from Luoyang, Cao Cao did indeed stop off at the home of an old friend of his father's, and while there, he managed to slaughter quite a number of people in the household. The sources, however, differ in their account. One source stated that when Cao Cao and his entourage arrived at the house, his father's friend was actually not home, and the man's sons and workers conspired to rob Cao Cao, prompting Cao Cao to kill a bunch of them in self-defense. But the Records of the Three Kingdoms also mentions another source that claims that while the friend was out, his five sons actually prepared a feast to welcome Cao Cao, but Cao Cao became suspicious of their motive and killed eight people before fleeing. Yet another source said that Cao Cao became suspicious when he heard the sound of utensils being prepared and thus said to himself, "Better I wrong others than to have others wrong

me.” All these sources were, of course, blended together in the part of the novel where Cao Cao and his traveling companion Chen Gong mistakenly slaughtered their hosts, and then the novel took it a step farther by having Cao Cao intentionally kill his father’s friend so as to avoid trouble later.

But let’s not worry about little things like who slaughtered whom and why. After Cao Cao returned home to Chenliu (2,2), he began to recruit an army, and in December of the year 189, he officially sounded the call for heroes of the land to mount a campaign against Dong Zhuo. This came about six months after Dong Zhuo first entered the capital and seized power. During that time, Dong Zhuo deposed one young emperor, replaced him with another, and then killed the deposed liege. Those actions led to other provincial officials joining the call for a campaign against Dong Zhuo, and that resulted in a coalition in early 190. In the novel, this was a coalition of 18 warlords, but in reality, there were only 13, and Cao Cao was one of them, leading an army that he could call his own for the first time at the age of 35.

To dodge the brunt of this coalition, Dong Zhuo moved the capital westward from Luoyang to Changan. Cao Cao led his army in pursuit but was defeated. Cao Cao turned out to be one of only a few leaders of the coalition who actually saw any combat. For the most part, the coalition just sat on its hands for months before dissolving amid infighting, much like in the novel.

A couple years after this failed coalition, the problem of Dong Zhuo was taken care of when court officials conspired with his trusted general Lü Bu to kill him in May 192. The bad news, however, was that the ensuing power grab by Dong Zhuo’s lieutenants threw the court and the empire into chaos, and it truly became a free-for-all.

That same year, Cao Cao put down a huge contingent of Yellow Turban rebels in Qing (1) Province. And don’t confuse this with the much-mentioned Jing Province, which lay in the South. Qing Province

is in the northeast. About 300,000 of the rebel soldiers surrendered to Cao Cao, along with more than a million civilians who were following the rebel army. From this group, Cao Cao selected the best of the best and organized them into what he called the Qing Province Army. This army would become the foundation of his ensuing strings of military successes, so this marks the moment when Cao Cao really became a power to reckon with.

Over the next 15 years, Cao Cao engaged in a series of battles against various warlords as he expanded his holdings and consolidated his power. He scored a major coup in 196 by taking the emperor into his protection. The emperor had fled from the capital Changan a year earlier to escape the clutches of Dong Zhuo's former lieutenants, and he was in a very pitiful and vulnerable state. On the advice of his strategist Xun (2) Yu (4), Cao Cao went to the emperor and pledged his forces to the service of the throne. In October that year, he convinced the emperor to move the capital of the empire to the city of Xuchang, Cao Cao's base of power.

This meant Cao Cao was now acting on the authority of the emperor in everything he did, which gave him prestige for sure, but more importantly, a significant degree of legitimacy in his campaigns against other factions. The ensuing years would see Cao Cao put down one foe after another. In 197, he forced Zhang Xiu (4) to surrender, giving him control of the territory to the north of Jing Province. In 199, he captured and executed Lü Bu, adding Xu (2) Province to his holdings. Then, in 200, he ousted a rebellious Liu Bei from Xu Province.

That same year, Cao Cao began his campaign against Yuan Shao, the most powerful of the warlords, at least on paper. The two sides began clashing in February, and by August, they had begun the most famous and pivotal of their showdowns, the Battle of Guandu (1,4). Many of the elements in the novel's description of this battle were drawn from historical accounts, from military tactics like

Cao Cao building catapults to attack the towers where Yuan Shao's archers were stationed, to logistical concerns such as Cao Cao's trouble with depleted provisions.

This battle lasted until October, when Cao Cao, on a tip from an adviser who had defected from Yuan Shao, launched a successful sneak attack that destroyed Yuan Shao's provisions. That knocked over the first of a series of dominoes, leading to the collapse of Yuan Shao's army and a total victory for Cao Cao. Yuan Shao managed to escape with his life, but after the Battle of Guandu, he never presented the same threat as before and found himself on the defensive. Two years after that pivotal battle, Yuan Shao died, and just like in the novel, his sons took to fighting amongst themselves. That gave Cao Cao the opening he needed, and he successfully wiped out the Yuan family in 207.

There was not much time to rest on his laurels, however. In July 208, the same month when he was promoted to prime minister, Cao Cao personally led a campaign to pacify the South. His plan was to first conquer Jing Province, which was held by Liu Biao (3), and then take over the Southlands, which was ruled by Sun Quan. The first part of that plan went off without a hitch, as Liu Biao died of illness in August and his son surrendered to Cao Cao.

The takeover of Jing Province pretty much marked the peak of Cao Cao's military career. At the age of 53, he controlled the northern half of the empire and was making promising inroads in the South. He would add more victories and territory going forward, but those gains were going to be accompanied by more losses than he had experienced in the previous 15 years.

The first of those setbacks came in December 208, a mere three months after he took over Jing Province. I speak, of course, of the Battle of Red Cliff, where the coalition of Sun Quan and Liu Bei, helped by disease that wreaked havoc on the Northern troops, dealt Cao Cao a decisive defeat. We already examined this battle in supplemental episode 6, so I will not rehash it here. But as we all

should know by now, this was the battle that prevented Cao Cao from steamrolling the South, and its outcome set the stage for the formation of three kingdoms.

After taking a couple years to regroup, Cao Cao set his sights on the West. His first big conflict there came against the general Ma Chao. This started in 211 when Cao Cao attempted to send an army through Ma Chao's territory on the premise that he was just passing through on his way to attack the region of Hanzhong, so you know, nothing to see here. But Ma Chao was convinced this was an attempt to launch a sneak attack against him, so he decided to rebel. That decision led to Cao Cao executing Ma Chao's father, Ma Teng, who at the time was serving in the city of Yejun (4,4), Cao Cao's base of power. This, by the way, is different than the novel's account of how things went south between Ma Chao and Cao Cao. In the fictional version, Cao Cao lured Ma Teng to the capital and killed him because he knew Ma Teng was part of a conspiracy against him. In real life, however, it was Ma Chao's uprising that led to his own father's death.

The on-again, off-again war between Ma Chao and Cao Cao went on for a couple years before Cao Cao defeated his opponent for good in 213. In 215, Cao Cao invaded Hanzhong and conquered it when its ruler surrendered. At this point, one of Cao Cao's advisers lobbied hard for him to keep going and attack Liu Bei, who had just recently taken over the neighboring Riverlands. But Cao Cao decided against it and instead returned to the capital, a decision he would later regret.

With his claim on Hanzhong, Cao Cao's territorial conquests reached their peak. Around the same time, he was climbing to the peak of his political powers as well. In 213, he was given the title of the Duke of Wei. Along with this title, he received 10 fiefdoms. To put that into context, when the Supreme Ancestor was bestowing titles of nobility on his own kinsmen after founding the Han Dynasty, none of them came anywhere near that many fiefdoms. Also, after a rebellion by some of the members of the imperial house in the early years of the Han Dynasty, a rule was created stating



that no one who got a title of nobility could receive more than one fiefdom. Well, Cao Cao went JUST slightly above that.

This title of Duke of Wei was bestowed upon Cao Cao by the emperor, at least officially, but in the year 216, Cao Cao gave himself a promotion to the King of Wei, and the next year, he began conducting himself as if he WERE the emperor, wearing imperial regalia, riding in imperial carriages, and building imperial palaces. This, now, was the highest political station he would attain.

But 217 also saw some setbacks for Cao Cao on the battlefield. In that year, Liu Bei and Sun Quan both launched attacks on his territory. Cao Cao's generals managed to hold off Sun Quan in the East, but Cao Cao himself had all sorts of trouble against Liu Bei out West in the region of Hanzhong. This conflict with Liu Bei went on for a couple years, and this was when Cao Cao's kinsman Xiahou Yuan (1) was killed in combat. That happened in the first month of the year 219 and allowed Liu Bei to take over Hanzhong. That March, Cao Cao personally led an army to reclaim the territory, but had little luck as Liu Bei dealt him a number of defeats. It got to the point where Cao Cao decided it just wasn't worth it anymore, so he packed up and went home, ceding the territory of Hanzhong to Liu Bei.

But losing Hanzhong was not the end of Cao Cao's troubles. That July, just two months after Cao Cao pulled out of Hanzhong, Liu Bei named himself the King of Hanzhong, a title that was once held by the Supreme Ancestor before his ascension to emperor, so you can guess at the implications. Liu Bei's general Guan Yu then mobilized the troops in Jing Province to attack a couple of Cao Cao's key holdings in that region. This was where Guan Yu drowned a relief force sent by Cao Cao. That defeat, coming in October 219, made Cao Cao seriously consider moving his capital to dodge the heat that Guan Yu was exerting, because Xuchang was fairly close to Jing Province. But Cao Cao was talked out of it by some of his advisers, and then he hooked up with Sun Quan to launch a joint attack against

Guan Yu that turned the tide and ultimately led to Guan Yu's downfall and Sun Quan taking over Jing Province.

That winter, Sun Quan offered his submission to Cao Cao as a political maneuver and urged him to name himself emperor, but Cao Cao declined, as he did in the novel, preferring to remain technically a vassal to throne he had served for so long, so as to avoid the label of usurper. Not long after this, on March 15 in the year 220, Cao Cao died in the city of Luoyang at the age of 66. His will left instructions that he was to be buried in Yejun, his base of power, but it also stipulated that he was to be buried without a horde of treasures in his tomb. His will also said that because the country was still unstable, none of the men on the frontiers were to leave their posts to attend his funeral.

So that's a 10,000-foot view of the career of the real Cao Cao. In broad strokes, the novel pretty much stays faithful to the historical accounts. When it comes to the character and legacy of Cao Cao, however, I think it's safe to say that the novel takes a little bit of liberty. So let's talk a little about what sort of man Cao Cao was and what sort of legacy he left.

First, let's talk about Cao Cao's character. In the novel, he is depicted as equal parts brilliant, crafty, deceitful, and blood-thirsty. Of course, the novel means to make him the main villain, and we have already discussed back in the Q&A episode how the Chinese's attitude toward the Wei Dynasty and Cao Cao changed in the centuries after his life. Namely, it went from a generally positive view of Cao Cao to a negative view, so we can be pretty sure that the portrayal in the novel is heavily biased. Let's dig through the historical records and see what elements of that fictional character might actually be true.

The novel describes a young Cao Cao as a crafty rogue who indulged in idle pursuits of leisure rather than more "proper" things. When we look at the historical text the Records of the Three Kingdoms, we actually see a similar description. In the original version of the Records of the Three

Kingdoms, which was a pretty barebones description of mostly historical events, we have one line describing Cao Cao's character during his youth. It said he was sharp-witted, calculating, and a bit of a free spirit in the negative sense. According to this entry, he was not industrious, which led to most people not marking him for greatness.

In the novel, we do have hints early on that Cao Cao was no ordinary man. For instance, we have the story of how one man who was regarded as a keen judge of character telling Cao Cao, "Rebellion is at hand, and only a man of the greatest ability can succeed in restoring tranquillity. That man is you." This anecdote actually came straight from the original version of the Records of the Three Kingdoms.

We do have many more anecdotes about Cao Cao's character in the later version of the Records of the Three Kingdoms, the version that was compiled more than a century after the original and was beefed up by incorporating a number of other sources that are deemed less reliable. Many of these anecdotes were incorporated into the novel.

For instance, early in the novel, we had a scene where the young Cao Cao pretended to have a seizure so as to trick an uncle who was always on his case about his behavior and discredit that uncle in the eyes of his father so that his old man would not believe the uncle the next time the uncle tattled on whatever Cao Cao did wrong now. That story came from the later version of the Records of the Three Kingdoms, which attributed that account to a text called The Story of Cao Cao, a work that is considered heavily biased against Cao Cao and filled with things that were more supernatural and fictional than factual, so its accounts should definitely be taken with a grain of salt.

Despite his youthful delinquency, we see evidence that once Cao Cao began his career, he didn't mess around with his duties. I mentioned earlier how strictly he applied the law in his first position, and that apparently was part of his administrative style for the rest of his life. In fact, he was seen as ruling according to the principles of legalism, a school of Chinese philosophy that emphasized strict

adherence to laws and punishments. At least, that's what the Confucian scholars painted him as, and they did not do that as a compliment. But as we'll soon see, Confucian scholars had reasons to hold a grudge against him.

First though, let's talk about some of Cao Cao's other vices. The novel depicts him as a rather lusty man, and there's some evidence that this was not entirely unfounded. After all, he had 15 wives and concubines and acknowledged more than 30 children, including 25 sons. And then there was that time in the novel when he accepted the general Zhang Xiu's (4) surrender but proceeded to mess around with the guy's aunt, leading Zhang Xiu to stage an uprising that put Cao Cao to flight and killed his eldest son. That actually happened. So yeah, there's definitely some smoke there.

Then there are the accounts of Cao Cao's cruelty. In the novel, he certainly chopped off more than his share of heads. Now certainly you can't really fault him for killing people who wanted to kill him, such as all those people who conspired against him at court. But there are also records of less justifiable acts of brutality that did not help his reputation. For instance, between 193 and 194, he launched an attack on Xu Province as a response to a military campaign by that province's imperial protector that led to Cao Cao's father being killed. Accounts differ as to how or why Cao Cao's father was killed. Some sources say the imperial protector of Xu Province specifically sent men to kill him, while other accounts say it was the act of a rogue officer who had been sent by the imperial protector to escort Cao Cao's father to safety.

In any case, Cao Cao's response, according to the historical source the Book of the Later Han, was way over the top. He not only launched an invasion of Xu Province, but also engaged in a massacre of its people. It was recorded that he slaughtered hundreds of thousands of men and women, and where his army swept through, not even chickens or dogs were spared. The bodies of the dead were dumped in a local river, and it is said that there were so many bodies that the river's flow was blocked. So yeah, not a very nice thing to do.

And that wasn't the only massacre attributed to Cao Cao. The Book of the Later Han also said that after one of his victories over Yuan Shao, about 80,000 of Yuan Shao's men surrendered to Cao Cao, but he had them all buried alive. Oh, and then there were the cases where he put to death anyone who rubbed him the wrong way, who tried to get close to his puppet emperor, or who just presented some sort of threat to him. If those historical records are indeed accurate, I think we can say that Cao Cao earned his reputation for cruelty in spades.

So far, our discussion of Cao Cao the man hasn't been particularly flattering, but let's shift our focus to Cao Cao the statesman, Cao Cao the politician, and Cao Cao the administrator, areas where I think he deserves much credit for what he accomplished, though again, we'll see that the Confucian scholars would have something to say about that.

Dr. Rafe de Crespigny, a noted Western scholar on the Three Kingdoms period, called Cao Cao a man from the margin, because Cao Cao did not come from a great lineage, and the Han Dynasty was a time when lineage was a huge factor in how far you could get in life and in the Han court. Cao Cao and his father got government jobs because of their connections with the eunuchs, who, while powerful behind the scenes, were looked upon as vermins by all the officials, as the novel made very clear. Cao Cao definitely was not considered in the same class as, say, Yuan Shao, who came from an illustrious family where four generations had served in one of the top three ministerial posts at court.

Given this context, it is indeed impressive that Cao Cao managed to rise to basically ruler of the northern half of the empire. And remember that he didn't just usurp power from the ruler of a united realm. He had to actually fight on the battlefield for every piece of territory under his name AND outmaneuver his enemies at court. Of course, he didn't do it alone. He recruited many men of talent, and HOW he recruited them is one of the big reasons that Cao Cao did not enjoy the favor of Confucian scholars.

So to lay out some background, Confucianism was HUGE during the Han Dynasty. It was basically THE philosophy of governance, and to even have a shot at a government career, you had to be well-versed in Confucianism. And Confucianism was all about doing things the right way, the morally ethical way, so a man's perceived character had just as much weight as his talent, if not more, when it came to career prospects.

But in the last years of the Han, the great upheavals that rocked society pried loose the Confucians' grip on power. As Cao Cao came in from the margins and rose toward the top, he elevated with him a group of men who could also be considered from the margins -- chosen not for their outstanding character, but for their talent. In fact, Cao Cao explicitly said he valued talent over character. Now, he certainly elevated his share of people from the literati, the pool from which the Han court traditionally drew people to fill its ranks. But he also pulled in people from a much wider array of backgrounds, no matter where they ranked on the Confucian morality scale.

Beyond revamping the qualifications section on the Han court's help-wanted ads, Cao Cao also administered according to the principles of legalism, as we mentioned earlier. Of course, legalism was the ruling principle of the Qin (2) Dynasty, which every good Confucian at the Han court knew as the corrupt, tyrannical dynasty that the Han overthrew. So, adopting legalism as his guiding principle set Cao Cao up as sort of the antithesis to the Confucians.

Now, why would he do this? According to de Crespigny, this was part of Cao Cao's efforts to rip power away from the great families of the time, which had traditionally dominated politics and were steeped in Confucianism. De Crespigny paints a political backdrop where true power during the later years of the Han rested not with the imperial government but with the landed gentry and the court officials, i.e., the people from the "good" families who were pious Confucians. What Cao Cao was trying to do was to centralize power in a strong imperial government, so he had to weaken those

families, and knocking Confucianism from its perch as the governing philosophy of the day was a key in doing that.

Of course, that move earned Cao Cao much scorn from Confucians in his time and in later ages. And since Confucianism would enjoy a resurgence in later eras, it was the Confucianists who got to put their spin on history. So in their telling, Cao Cao failed to reunite the empire because he was not a pious man. I quote from a lecture by de Crespigny here:

“... rather than receiving praise for creating a measure of order out of chaos, Cao Cao receives blame for not doing more -- and in Confucianist analysis this political failure is explained by a lack of personal virtue. So Cao Cao is painted as cruel and cunning, a brilliant but flawed tyrant, the man against whom the loyal Liu Bei, the brave Guan Yu and the brilliant Zhuge Liang, all men of Shu-Han, could demonstrate their wisdom, nobility and skill.”

Still, even the most biased Confucianist spin cannot cover up the fact that Cao Cao DID reunite the northern half of the empire, which says something about his skills as a commander and politician. But that was not his only noteworthy accomplishment. When he wasn't fighting for territory on the battlefield, he was paying attention to important aspects of society, and chief among them were agriculture and education.

To take agriculture first: We've seen numerous mentions of famine in the novel, especially in the early parts, as a result of natural disasters and man-made wars. In real life, there was indeed a major famine in 194 due to a plague of locusts that left the people so desperate that they turned to cannibalism to survive. This was terrible for the general population, to be sure, but it also was a major blow to the armies because, as the old saying goes, an army marches on its stomach.

Recognizing the importance of a stable food supply, Cao Cao enacted a series of agricultural programs. He recruited refugees -- of which there were many, thanks to the continuous military

conflicts -- and he put them to work cultivating wasteland. Later on, when things had settled down a bit, there were periods when squadrons of soldiers were not needed to be on constant standby for war, so Cao Cao put those soldiers to work as farmers. This practice caught on in other parts of the empire as well, and it helped to improve the food situation. Now, Cao Cao did this to strengthen his army, but it did have the coincidental side effect of benefitting the civilians as well, and if you were a civilian at the time, that was probably about as good as you could hope for. Seriously, the Three Kingdoms period sounds like a really bad time to be alive.

On the education front, in the year 203, by which point he had destroyed most of Yuan Shao's forces, Cao Cao decreed that counties and cities in his territories were to start paying more attention to education. Every county above a certain size had someone in charge of education, and promising youths were picked to go to school. At the same time, Cao Cao also paid special attention to collecting and preserving literary works. In those ways, he helped keep scholarship alive during a time when the pen played second fiddle to the sword.

But Cao Cao did more than just promote and preserve scholarship. He also had a reputation as a fine scholar in his own right. He is recognized as a standout poet of the era, and so were two of his sons, Cao Pi and Cao Zhi. Together, they were known as the Three Caos, and their works were key drivers of a particular style of poetry known as Jian'an (4,1) poetry, taking its name from the imperial name of the era during which Cao Cao's son ruled. This style represented a move away from the conventional poetry popular during the Han Dynasty.

The typical Han poem, in a style known as Fu (4), tended to be very long and described a subject, such as a place, object, or feeling, in very minute details from many angles. The typical Fu (4) poem also tended to use an anonymous voice and tried to cram in as many exotic Chinese characters as possible, as if the composers were trying to show off their SAT vocabulary.



In contrast, Jian'an poetry is known for using a more personal and direct voice. Cao Cao's work, in particular, was deemed as unpretentious and yet profound. Only a fraction of Cao Cao's work has actually survived, but we got a taste of it in episode 59 when I regaled you with the poem he sang on his ship at Red Cliff. The works of Cao Cao, his sons, and other poets who contributed to the Jian'an style had a major impact on the development of Chinese poetry. Tang Dynasty poetry, which arose four centuries after Cao Cao, is generally considered the cream of the crop when it comes to classical Chinese poetry, and aspects of Tang poetry can be traced back to the developments that began with Jian'an poetry.

So there you have it, a much longer-than-usual episode and yet still merely a 10,000-foot view of the complicated, multi-faceted creature that was Cao Cao. As a kid, I saw him as the stories portrayed him: a villain. But as I have come to learn more about Cao Cao, I have definitely developed a much greater appreciation for the man. He trampled many an existing norm in climbing to the top of the political ladder. He was a commander who reunited half of the empire by military might, a statesman who improved the lives of the people in his territories, a tyrant who held the emperor as his puppet and killed anyone who dared to defy him, a scholar who helped forge a new direction for Chinese literature, a villain so universally recognized through the centuries that he has his own distinct Beijing opera mask. People have called him cunning, cruel, lusty, deceitful, and treacherous, and there are parts of the historical records that could be cited to support all of those descriptors. But no one could deny that he also brought a semblance of order to chaos. In an era when anybody who was somebody thought they could become top dog, Cao Cao was one of three men who actually succeeded. And that, I think, is nothing to scoff at. And the remainder of our podcast will definitely be poorer for his absence.

For now, let's bid Cao Cao farewell, and I'll see you next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!