

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

In this episode, I'm going to delve into the life of the real Shu general Zhang Fei and compare and contrast him with his fictional counterpart, who exited our narrative in episode 102. This is going to be a short episode, because compared to his sworn brothers Liu Bei and Guan Yu, there is relatively little in the historical records about Zhang Fei, but we'll do the best we can.

We don't have a birth year for Zhang Fei, but we do know that he joined up with Liu Bei and Guan Yu in the year 184 as they raised a militia to help put down the Yellow Turban Rebellion. As we discussed in the supplemental episode on Guan Yu, the historical records say that the three of them were LIKE brothers, but there is nothing that says they were actually sworn brothers. But in any case, they were close, by all accounts.

For his role in quelling the rebellion, Liu Bei was given a position as the magistrate of the county of Pingyuan (2,2) in the year 191, and Zhang Fei served on his staff. Now, in episode 2 of the podcast, we covered the incident that led to Liu Bei giving up this position. A government inspector was coming around fishing for bribes, and when the incorruptible Liu Bei refused to cave, the inspector made some nasty threats. In the novel, that turned out to be a really bad idea as Zhang Fei got wind of it and proceeded to tie the inspector to a post and whip him until Liu Bei intervened.

And here's where we run into a discrepancy between the real-life Zhang Fei and the fictional Zhang Fei. In real life, this whipping did occur, but it was not Zhang Fei who did it. So who actually did it? How about our pious and compassionate saint, Liu Bei? Yup, in real life, Liu Bei was the one who whipped the inspector, but we can't have such an impulsive outburst staining the sterling reputation of the novel's main protagonist and the pillar of virtue held up as the contrast to the wicked usurper Cao Cao, so let's just attribute this beating to his sort-of sworn brother instead. It's interesting that the novel portrays

Zhang Fei as ill-tempered and quick-to-anger, because when you look at the historical records about him, there is actually relatively little there to support this depiction.

Fast forward five years to 196, and we find that Liu Bei had kind of lucked into being the unofficial imperial protector of Xu Province. But while he was away on campaign, he left Zhang Fei in charge, and one of Zhang Fei's subordinates, an officer named Cao (2) Bao (4), conspired with the warlord Lü Bu to take over the province. Zhang Fei managed to kill Cao Bao, but could not fend off Lü Bu, so he had to flee. In the novel, the cause of this coup was Zhang Fei getting drunk at a party, then getting mad at Cao Bao (4) for not drinking enough, and whipping him for the ... umm ... offense of not getting poop-faced at a party. So Cao Bao held a grudge and conspired with Lü Bu to get some revenge. The historical records, however, give us no information at all on why Cao Bao was mad at Zhang Fei; they just said that the two did not get along.

Let's skip forward again to the year 200. At this point, Lü Bu was dead and Liu Bei was once again in charge of Xu Province. But Cao Cao was coming to punish him for being part of a conspiracy against Cao Cao. This fight did not go well for Liu Bei, and he and his men were scattered. This was when Guan Yu briefly joined Cao Cao's service. As for Zhang Fei, there is no information in the historical records on whether he was separated from Liu Bei, as depicted in the novel, or if he actually remained by Liu Bei's side as they fled.

But there is one interesting note in the historical records about Zhang Fei in the year 200. In that year, he came across a young lass of 13 or 14. This girl was a niece of Xiahou Yuan (1), one of Cao Cao's kinsmen and top warriors. Zhang Fei took a liking to her and promptly abducted her. Yeah, real chivalrous. And when he found out who she was, he decided, hey, here's a nice girl from a good family ... whom I kidnapped; I'm going to marry her. And so they were wed. How she felt about the whole thing was neither here nor there, and definitely not in the historical records, though I can't imagine she would

have been particularly happy about it. In any case, she wound up bearing Zhang Fei two daughters, and both of them became empresses of Liu Bei's son, Liu Shan (4). So yup, the empresses of the kingdom of Shu were the daughters of a woman who hailed from the clan of Cao Cao, Liu Bei's most hated nemesis, and who was abducted as a teenager. That just seems all kinds of awkward. Also, when you think of the character of Zhang Fei in the novel, you don't typically picture a guy who kidnaps and marries 13-year-old child brides, and yet here we are. I can see why this was left out of the novel.

Now, let's get to some of the more famous episodes involving Zhang Fei, and none is more memorable than the scene from the novel where he single-handedly held off Cao Cao's entire pursuing army at a bridge to give Liu Bei time to escape. That actually happened. Zhang Fei was bringing up the rear with 20 riders, and he held a bridge -- albeit a disassembled one--and shouted, "I am Zhang Fei! Come fight me to the death!" But nobody felt like fighting Zhang Fei to the death, so that was enough to keep the pursuing army at bay.

Another memorable scene in the novel had Zhang Fei sparing the captured enemy general Yan (2) Yan (2) while leading an army to invade the Riverlands. And this pretty much happened exactly the same way in real life, too. Zhang Fei was impressed by Yan Yan's courage in the face of imminent execution, so he spared the guy, which in turned convinced Yan Yan to surrender and help make Zhang Fei's invasion go more smoothly.

As for Zhang Fei's death, there is not much in the historical records about it. It's basically just one sentence that said he was assassinated by his subordinates Zhang Da (2) and Fan (4) Qiang (2) at the outset of Liu Bei's punitive campaign against Dongwu over the death of Guan Yu. In the novel, we are told that the assassins made their move after Zhang Fei had beaten them as punishment, but no motive was given in the historical records. However, in the Records of the Three Kingdoms, we do see a passing

mention that said Liu Bei often cautioned Zhang Fei about whipping his subordinates and then keeping them around. So I guess the novel may have just taken some liberty and artistic license on the demise of the great warrior.

So that pretty much does it for Zhang Fei. Like I said, there's not that much about him in the historical records. There ARE some contemporary statements about him, mostly praising his valor and skill as a fighter. One person, however, had some harsh things to say about him, calling him brutal and heartless. That guy was none other than Chen (2) Shou (4), the person who wrote the Records of the Three Kingdoms, on which the novel was based. But like I said earlier, there actually isn't much in the records to suggest that Zhang Fei was the ill-tempered brute he is portrayed to be in the novel. A guy who kidnaps and marries teenage girls, sure, but not necessarily a brute, not by third-century Chinese standards anyway.

So that's it. I hope you enjoyed this short supplemental episode on the real and fictional Zhang Fei, and I'll see you next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!