

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

In this episode, we're going to talk about a famous assassin, Yao (1) Li (2). His story was invoked by the Wei general Jia (3) Kui (2) in episode 123, when he tried to talk some sense into his commander Cao Xiu. Cao Xiu had been fooled by a governor from the kingdom of Wu who said he was going to surrender his territory to Wei. To convince Cao Xiu of his loyalty, this governor had cut off his hair, which as we discussed in episode 123, was no small thing. So Cao Xiu believed him. But Jia Kui told Cao Xiu, "Look, cutting off hair is NOTHING. Just look at the story of Yao (1) Li (2), who cut off his arm to assassinate a man."

So, let's look at the story of Yao Li, and there's a lot more to it than just cutting off an arm to assassinate a man. And if you thought cutting off an arm so you could kill a man is cringe-inducing, just wait.

Yao Li lived during the Spring and Autumn period, that famous period of division that has given rise to so many idioms and references in our novel. Yao Li lived sometime in the early 500s B.C., in the southern state of Wu (2). And yes, I know. We also have a state of Wu in the Three Kingdoms era. They both occupy somewhat similar territories, which is why the state in the Three Kingdoms adopted the name of a state that existed centuries before.

Anyway, to talk about Yao Li, we must first talk about the king of Wu at this time. This king came to the throne by assassinating his own cousin. But his cousin's son, who was named Qing (4) Ji (4), fled to another state. Qing Ji was known as a man of courage and smarts. It was said that he once managed to capture an elk AND a rhino on a hunt, though I'm not sure where you would find a rhino along the Yangzi River delta. While in exile, Qing (4) Jin (4) raised a big army with the intent of coming back home and doing the, "You killed my father, prepare to die" thing.

This of course, was a problem for the king of Wu, and he desperately wanted to do away with Qing Ji. His top adviser told him, "Hey, I found this butcher slash fisherman who would be perfect for the job."

This, of course, was Yao (1) Li (2), and his resume sounded pretty good. His father was apparently a professional assassin, so he's got that going for him. He apparently also was quite clever and very courageous. So the king summoned him. But when Yao Li arrived, he did not exactly strike an imposing figure. He was short and skinny, and very ugly. But he talked a good game, and after the king laid out the job for which he was being considered, Yao Li eagerly volunteered.

The king, though, wasn't so sure. Aside from Yao Li's appearance, there was also the fact that his target, Qing Ji was notoriously suspicious, and it was nearly impossible for anyone to earn his trust to get close enough to him to make an attempt on his life. But Yao Li had a great idea.

"My lord," he said to the king, "you can kill my wife and then cut off one of my arms. That will eliminate Qing Ji's suspicion."

Ok, I think we can go with ... WAIT, WHAT?! You want me to ... kill your wife ... and cut off one of your arms. Uhh, maybe you should consider your job is taking over your life?

"You're helping me to eliminate an enemy; how can I kill your wife?" said the king, astonished that Yao Li would even suggest such a thing.

But Yao Li was undeterred.

"How can a soldier enjoy the warmth of family?" he replied. "All your lordship need to do is give them a good burial upon my return."

So, the king did a little quick mental calculation about the morals at play here, and he decided that he actually could live with killing the wife of the man who's going to do him a huge favor. So, he and Yao Li put on a good show in court where Yao Li offended the king, and the king, in a fit of rage, had him and his wife thrown into prison, and then cut off Yao Li's right arm, which, by the way, was his strong arm. Yao Li then found an ... umm, "opportunity" to escape from prison, which then gave the king all the excuse he needed to have Yao Li's wife put to death. But not only that, he took it one step further and

had the poor woman's body burned and displayed in public. [SIGH] Yeah, it sucked to be a woman in the Spring and Autumn period.

So anyway, Yao Li, now a self-made bachelor and missing an arm, went to see Qing (4) Ji (4) and told him that he was there to join Qing Ji's quest for vengeance. Qing Ji's initial reaction was one of skepticism, given that Yao Li was from the very state that he was planning to attack. But then, upon finding out from his spy network that Yao Li really did lose his wife and an arm at the hands of the king of Wu, Qing Ji said, ok, I believe you. I mean, nobody could want to kill me so badly that he would literally sacrifice his own wife and an arm to earn my trust. So Qing Ji took Yao Li into his confidence and charged him with training the troops and preparing the ships for the coming invasion of the state of Wu.

Some time passed, and Qing Ji was now ready to launch his fleet and attack Wu. Yao Li now told him, "You should be sitting at the front of your war ship so as to boost the men's morale and direct the fleet."

Qing Ji was like, that's great idea, and since you lost your arm and your wife to the king of Wu, I have no reason to suspect any ulterior motive in that suggestion. So Qing Ji took his seat at the front of the ship, and Yao Li stood next to him with a short spear in his left hand.

As the fleet sailed along the river, a strong wind suddenly whipped up, and Qing Ji's ship started to rock back and forth. Qing Ji himself also swayed back and forth, and at the very moment, while he was losing his balance, he felt a stabbing pain in his back, and a split second later, that pain shot out from the front. He looked down and saw a short spear -- Yao Li's short spear -- protruding from his chest.

Turning around to face Yao Li, Qing Ji now understood everything. The lost arm, the dead wife, it was all a ruse to gain his trust. And now, the story veers into total suspension of disbelief. I mean, if we weren't there already. Qing Ji showed off his berserker side and demonstrated why he was considered

the bravest man in the land. The spear poking out of his chest notwithstanding, he now grabbed Yao Li with one hand and forced his head into the water three times, until Yao Li was almost dead. He now threw Yao Li across his knee and laughed out loud.

“Who knew there could be a man courageous enough to use such a scheme to assassinate me,” Qing Ji said to Yao Li.

At that moment, Qing Ji’s guards were ready to charge in and kill Yao Li, but incredibly, Qing Ji waved them off.

“He is a man of rare courage,” Qing Ji told his guards. “How can we kill two brave men in one day? Do not harm Yao Li. Let him return to the state of Wu so that he may demonstrate his loyalty to his master.”

Then, Qing Ji threw Yao Li onto the deck of the ship and pulled out the spear from his chest. Yeah, ouch! And not surprisingly, he immediately bled to death.

Now, somewhat surprisingly, Qing Ji’s men actually did as he instructed and allowed Yao Li to live. But Yao Li figured that after everything he had done, there wasn’t gonna be a place for him in this world, so he threw himself into the river in a suicide attempt. But Qing Ji’s men quickly fished him out and told him to cut it out and just go home to claim his reward.

So Yao Li returned to the king of Wu and told him that the mission was a success. The king was delighted and was ready to heap huge rewards on Yao Li. But Yao Li refused.

“I did not kill Qing Ji for rank or riches,” he told the king. “I did it so that our people could live in peace and not suffer the ravages of war.”

And with that, Yao Li pulled out his sword, slit his own throat, and died. And the king was like, oh great, now you got blood all over my carpet.

So um, yeah, that was the story of Yao Li, a man who was perhaps JUST a tad too committed to his work. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this supplemental episode and that you now understand why Jia Kui would scoff at someone cutting off his own hair. I'll see you next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!