

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

In this episode, we will take a look at the real life Sima Yi, the architect of the Sima clan's rise to power in the Wei court.

Sima Yi was unceremoniously introduced in the novel. In episode 48 of our podcast, he appeared in a passing mention where he was one of several guys that Cao Cao promoted while beefing up the civil administration. I made a note at that time to that you should pay attention to Sima Yi. But in the novel, there was no call-out, and he just snuck in and lay low for about half the novel before rising to prominence after Cao Cao's death.

While it may appear that Sima Yi came out of nowhere, in reality, he definitely had a reputation that preceded him. The Sima clan was a prominent family even before the Han Dynasty. After the fall of the Qin Dynasty, the predecessor to the Han, the empire fractured into 18 small feudal states, and one of Sima Yi's ancestors was the ruler of one of those states. Their state later became of the Han empire, and the Sima clan remained one of the most powerful families. Members of the clan served in the government for generations. The several generations immediately preceding Sima Yi served in various generalships and governorships, while Sima Yi's father was a superintendent.

Coming from this illustrious lineage, Sima Yi did not exactly fly under the radar. Even in his youth, he was said to have been crafty and often concerned about the empire, which was teetering at the time. At the age of 22, he was nominated to join the civil service.

At that point, Cao Cao was not yet prime minister but had started his ascent up the political ladder. When Cao Cao heard about Sima Yi's reputation, he wanted to bring the guy onto his personal staff. Sima Yi, though, didn't want to serve under Cao Cao, so he claimed that he had been paralyzed and could not serve. Cao Cao was naturally suspicious, so he sent someone to spy on Sima Yi at night. Sima Yi, well aware that Cao Cao might be keeping him under tight watch, laid motionless in bed all night, and that fooled the spy, who told Cao Cao that Sima Yi was indeed paralyzed.

Fast forward seven years, and Cao Cao was now the prime minister, and through the grapevine he had learned somewhere along the way that Sima Yi had miraculously gotten better from his paralysis. So now, Cao Cao made another effort to court Sima Yi. Well, “court” isn’t exactly the right word for it. Let’s just say that Cao Cao made Sima Yi an offer he couldn’t refuse, not if he wanted to keep his head. Given the choice of serving or dying, Sima Yi chose the pragmatic path, and that was how he came to be in the Han court.

This is the point where Sima Yi first appeared in the novel. He started out as an attendant to the crown prince and then moved on to various other positions. But gradually, Cao Cao began to have second thoughts about this guy he tried so hard to recruit. He detected that Sima Yi may be harboring uncommon ambitions. Cao Cao warned his son Cao Pi that Sima Yi was not one to take orders from somebody else forever, so best be on guard against him. Fortunately for Sima Yi, he was on very good terms with Cao Pi, so nothing really came of it.

Now, in the novel, we didn’t really hear much about Sima Yi after he began serving Cao Cao. But about a decade or so later, he did pop up briefly. In the year 219, the Shu general Guan Yu began attacking Cao Cao’s holdings in Jing Province and was proving so successful that Cao Cao considered moving the capital to stay out of potential harm’s way. But Sima Yi was among a group of court officials who talked him out of it, and they suggested that he ally with Sun Quan to take on Guan Yu. Cao Cao did that, and sure enough, Guan Yu ended up dead by Sun Quan’s hand.

But that was kind of it for a while as far as Sima Yi’s time in the spotlight. We know he served in some fairly high-level posts during the reign of Cao Pi, but the novel doesn’t really talk about him until after Cao Pi died and his son Cao Rui came to the throne.

When Cao Pi died in the year 226, the Southlands decided to take advantage of the change in leadership to launch an invasion against the kingdom of Wei. Sima Yi commanded one of the defense

forces, and he defeated the army led by Zhuge Jin, for which he was promoted to the General of the Chariots and Cavalry.

That victory kind of kicked off Sima Yi's career leading armies in the field. A couple years later, he made his lightning quick strike on the renegade general Meng Da and put him down. A couple years after that, in the year 230, Sima Yi got involved in military action against the kingdom of Shu for the first time, when he and the Wei commander Cao Zhen (1) launched an incursion into Shu that ultimately ended unsuccessfully because of rain.

Now, you may be asking, "Wait a minute. In the novel, Sima Yi had been involved long before that. Didn't he foil Zhuge Liang's first Northern campaign by defeating that know-it-all Ma (3) Su (4) and made Zhuge Liang have to bluff his way out of danger when he was trapped in a city with no troops facing down a huge Wei army?" Well, that may be how the novel told it, but there doesn't seem to be any historical records mentioning Sima Yi's involvement in either that battle or in Zhuge Liang's second Northern campaign, both of which preceded Sima Yi's unsuccessful incursion into Shu territory. After that, though, and all the way till Zhuge Liang's death in 234, Sima Yi was in the thick of the action along the Shu-and-Wei border, turning back one incursion after another from Zhuge Liang.

Eventually, Sima Yi outlasted Zhuge Liang as the latter died on his final Northern campaign. Now, remember that part of the novel where Zhuge Liang played one last trick on his foe by having his men put his wooden sculpture on a cart to make Sima Yi think that he was still alive? Well, that sort of happened, minus the sculpture. Sima Yi did indeed give chase when he heard that Zhuge Liang had died and the Shu forces were on the retreat. But the Shu forces had prepared for that possibility. When Sima Yi got close, the Shu forces made it look like they were turning around to strike. Sima Yi saw that, thought he was running into an ambush, and called for a retreat. That gave rise to the old saying that a dead Zhuge Liang could put a live Sima Yi to flight.

After Zhuge Liang's death, Sima Yi continued to show off his military chops. In the year 238, he led an army to the northeast to pacify an insurrection by the governor of Liaodong (2,1), Gongsun Yuan. That, coming at the age of 59, was pretty much the height of Sima Yi's military success.

The following year, the Wei emperor Cao Rui died, and his young son Cao Fang stepped into the throne. Just like in the novel, Cao Rui, on his deathbed, entrusted his heir to Sima Yi and Cao Shuang. And just like in the novel, the relationship between Sima Yi and Cao Shuang turned sour after a good start. It's said that in the beginning, Cao Shuang treated Sima Yi with utmost respect, but soon began to try elbow Sima Yi out of power on the advice of his staff. He managed to get Sima Yi promoted out of power and into a position with no real military authority. Cao Shuang then controlled the court for 10 years, but just in the novel, Sima Yi caught him off guard in the year 249. While Cao Shuang was accompanying the emperor on a visit to the ancestral tombs, Sima Yi staged a coup in the capital, which ended with Cao Shuang's execution and Sima Yi seizing control of the military.

Now the novel skips over a somewhat significant event that happened after the coup. A couple years after Sima Yi seized power, two officials, including one who was overseeing the city of Shouchun, staged an insurrection and tried to make one of Cao Cao's sons emperor. Well, Sima Yi quickly put them down and executed everyone involved, including unfortunate son of Cao Cao's. If you remember, the city of Shouchun was a constant source of trouble for the Sima clan, and this was the first wave of those troubles. Two more attempts at insurrection would follow in the next seven years, but they were both put down by Sima Yi's sons, who took over control of the court after Sima Yi died in the year 251.

So far, we've focused mostly on Sima Yi's military exploits, but he also did a lot on the civil administration side. To cover that aspect, we need to backtrack a little bit. While he was still serving under Cao Cao, Sima Yi had put forth a plan for using soldiers to till the soil. As we mentioned before, this was a popular practice during the Three Kingdoms era as a way to reclaim abandoned farmland to

address frequent food shortages. Sima Yi could claim a fair amount of credit for this. Cao Cao accepted his suggestion but died soon thereafter. Before he died, though, Cao Cao did put that recommendation into practice, and this practice really took off during the reign of Cao Pi, and part of the foundation for that work was laid by Sima Yi.

In addition, Sima Yi also implemented some large-scale agricultural and irrigation works in the southeastern portion of the kingdom of Wei. It is recorded that when the region to the east of the Heartlands experienced famine, Sima Yi was able to send significant amounts of grain as relief, which showed that under his administration, the kingdom's agriculture was doing well enough to have surplus grain stored.

Sima Yi was also apparently a rather thrifty manager of the kingdom's budget. When Cao Rui, the second of the three emperors whom he served, was running up the tab with his extravagant palace construction, Sima Yi tried to check him. And after Cao Rui died, Sima Yi asked that the unfinished work be abandoned. And when Sima Yi himself died, he had left instructions that he was to be buried in a humble grave on a mountain with no markers around his tomb. He was to be buried in plain clothes, with no horde of treasure in his grave. The novel doesn't mention this, but I feel compelled to point out that in this regard, he was much like Zhuge Liang, his longtime nemesis and foil in the novel.

One interesting note about Sima Yi's career is that even though he staged a coup to grab control of the court, he then steadfastly refused attempts by the emperor to heap titles and honors upon him. When the emperor tried to make him prime minister, Sima Yi allegedly wrote more than 10 memorials declining the title. Later, when the emperor tried to give him the Nine Dignities, he also refused to accept.

Now, let's talk briefly about Sima Yi's legacy. If you look at contemporary opinions, he actually had a pretty good reputation during the Three Kingdoms era and the subsequent Jin (4) Dynasty, which his descendants founded. In fact, during one of the three insurrections from commanders in the city of Shouchun (4,1), even though the insurgents were rebelling against the Sima clan, they made a point of praising Sima Yi, who had died by then, for his loyal service to the kingdom, and they accused his sons of not following in their father's footsteps, which was why the rebellion was necessary.

But Sima Yi's reputation began to slump when the Western Jin dynasty crumbled. The end of the Western Jin dynasty threw the empire into chaotic division once again, and even though there was an Eastern Jin Dynasty that followed, it was but one of many kingdoms in the empire. Ironically, the rulers of the Eastern Jin found themselves in much the same situation as the kingdom of Shu during the Three Kingdoms period. Remember that Shu maintained that it was the legitimate continuation of the Han Dynasty, even though it was holding down only a corner of the empire. So now that the Eastern Jin found itself in a similar position, it began to identify more with the Shu and came to see it as the good guys from the Three Kingdoms era. That, of course, made the enemies of Shu, including Sima Yi, take a hit reputation-wise. After the Eastern Jin ended, the decline in Sima Yi's legacy continued, and you can see the result in the novel, where he is identified as crafty in a fiendish way and often made to be the victim of Zhuge Liang's tricks. But if you look just at accomplishments, I think you would have to give Sima Yi his due since after all, he did lay the foundation for his heirs to eventually take over the kingdom of Wei and reunite the empire.

Alright, that does it for Sima Yi. I hope you enjoyed this supplemental episode, and I'll see you next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!