Ravages Of time
Guandu arc

Hello, this is my first time making a doc so there will be mistakes so ignore that.

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This doc is going to cover the Guandu arc chapter by chapter.
So,let's start

now, one amusing tidbit about the Guandu arc proper is that what's traditionally regarded as the first big engagement (the battle in Baima/Boma against Yan Liang) isn't included in it, but is instead featured in the preceding arc (so as to emphasize the overlap between the campaigns in the south and the north)

basically Yan Liang and Wen Chou led the vanguard troops advancing into Cao Cao's position, with Yan Liang in charge of the forward unit, and Wen Chou basically serving as a follow-up of sorts (or another way to put it would be that whereas Yan Liang was rapidly charging and forcing Cao Cao to withdraw further as part of a broader strategy to lure the Yuan army deep into unfriendly territory Wen Chou led a more quiet and methodical march with the help of sympathizers and guides)

and as we have seen in previous chapters, Yan Liang was killed by Guan Yu while Xiahou Dun and Zhang Liao prevented the Wuwan army from reinforcing Yan Liang's main troop

to be fair, although Yan Liang advanced rather recklessly, Han Meng was there to back him up and prevent an encirclement but then Guo Jia played a dirty trick by exploiting Liu Bei's sense of brotherhood

Wen Chou on the other hand has a more methodical approach when it comes to maneuvers, and has anticipated that Cao Cao is banking on the Yuan army becoming overextended and separated

a poignant commentary on how high-ranking officers and officials don't necessarily get promoted purely on the basis of merit or excellence in the relevant fields (or to put it in another way, they reached the top because they merited or excelled in cultivating convenient connections, haha)

on a side note, Plato remarked somewhere about how it's one thing to be good at some craft, and it's another thing to be good at attracting wealth or selling stuff related to some craft... in this case, Wen Chou happens to be good at both commanding an army and scheming to get ahead

amusingly, this quote from the Records of the Grand Historian about how a lot of things get done behind the scenes without people knowing until it's too late can also be seen as a meta remark on the off-panel developments featured in the chapter (and occurring throughout the series in general), as well as how it's the secret schemes that are decisive rather than the showy battles

for instance, we never got to see how exactly Wen Chou was able to prevent Liu Bei's counselors from establishing contact with Liu Biao (who's supposed to be a nominal ally of Yuan Shao in the 'united front' against Cao Cao)

perhaps messages traveled quickly, and once Wen Chou received word that Guan Yu killed Yan Liang, he then instructed his troops to prevent Liu Bei (who willingly offered himself knowing that Yuan Shao won't dare harm him) and his associates (who were supposed to conduct the secret diplomatic mission) from securing a way out in the south

this tidbit serves as an important reminder that just because one has set up ambushes doesn't mean that they would work (especially if the numerical disparity is too large to overcome using a few surprise attacks here and there)

key to the success of Wen Chou's methodical march is that those supposed to be on the lookout in Cao Cao's side are secretly helping out the Yuan army, and so it's Guo Jia rather than Wen Chou who ended up being ambushed at the early stage of the showdown

Ravages battle scenarios can be rather confusing given all those hazy drawings of the troops fighting one another (especially since there are no reader-friendly local maps and formation diagrams to help people visually make sense of the situation), though I think I can make sense of what's going on here just by paying attention to the speech bubbles

Wen Chou used a formation with the cavalry as the wings and the infantry at the center, and basically the 2 cavalry units (one commanded by Wen Chou, the other commanded by his deputies) converged and enveloped Guo Jia's center vanguard commanded by Yue Jin

the idea is to muddle and scatter the middle, and to let the 2 cavalry units somehow blend together in the assault without an aggressive pursuit of retreating troops... all this so that Wen Chou's position can be concealed, thereby allowing him to conduct a surprise breach amidst the chaos and head straight for Guo Jia

on a stylistic note, Ravages has a knack for inserting low-key banter and passive-aggressive exchanges in the midst of serious situations, but without having to contrive moments of relief or relaxation (that is to say, the people involved may crack jokes, but they're not performing comedic scenes)

this is related to how many characters are constantly eager to either devise schemes or reflect about issues even while resting or partying...

Liu Ye (entrusted to 'protect' members of the imperial clan and prevent them from defecting to Yuan Shao) is in a way still concerned about the fate of his kin, exemplified in his negotiation with Guo Jia (who happens to be in serious trouble after fleeing from Wen Chou) to spare the disloyal from punishment in exchange for help in an improvised trap

this is also a reminder that not everything goes as planned, but one can adapt as situations change and come up with alternative plans and contingency measures

and in this case, the scheme happens to be a very cheap one (but with very expensive materials as tools), taking advantage of common and deep-rooted desires and anxieties to undermine troop discipline, thereby showing that wise commands and smart plans are one thing, implementation by the rank-and-file is another thing

aside from the didactic point about virtue (and how easy it is for many to stumble and stray), there is also the cautionary political note about the difficulties of governing people and managing morale (and how ultimately armies are only as good as the tricks and apparatuses used to get people to go along with the program)

if we recall, during the engagement with Yan Liang, Guo Jia was with Yue Jin and Xu Huang while Zhang Liao was in a nearby front dealing with the Wuwan army

perhaps in the engagement with Wen Chou, Zhang Liao was already positioned near Guo Jia, ready to conduct the surprise attack (though I wonder how all this would have worked out had Guo Jia not been able to rendezvous with Liu Ye and prepare his underhanded trick)

although chapter 320 is for the most part action-intensive, it also makes room for some poignant reflections, courtesy of Wen Chou's descent into panic as he sees the various plans and preparations collapse in the face of overwhelming force and unfavorable conditions

on that note, one can see the whole process of making plans not just as a matter of instrumental calculation, but also as a morale-boosting technique in its own right (even in our own daily living, plans and schedules help reassure us)

now, Zhang Liao's feat of killing Wen Chou not only further cements his status as an elite warrior (a stone polishing a gem), but this also serves as one of Zhang Liao's many rites of graduation ultimately culminating in Hefei years later as Lu Bu's former protege (the gem having been polished by a stone from another hill, before shining on its own)

and considering that Zhang Liao was once one of Lu Bu's body doubles and Wen Chou happened to kill a bunch of them in the first arc, things have come full circle

it's important to emphasize though that while Zhang Liao caught Wen Chou by surprise and delivered the killing blow, the battle was lost mainly because the troops fell for the improvised trap and weren't able to properly regroup once the Cao army launched a counterattack... and Guo Jia is credited for coming up with the contingency plan (and using a well-kept trump card)

remember, what's decisive in Ravages are not so much the fights, but the schemes in action

321 mainly covers the extended fallout of Wen Chou losing the battle in Yan ford, a reminder that things don't just end with the deaths of commanders

as with the usual setup of these troops on the march, the vanguard units march ahead to clear the path, with the rations transport (and then the rest of the army) following suit... of course if the vanguard collapses this makes the supplies easy targets (or alternatively, find a way to ambush the convoy first and one can force the vanguard to withdraw)

this pretty much explains why Ravages campaigns tend to feature a lot of supply raids

basically after taking out Wen Chou, Guo Jia ordered the troops to go on the offensive, rapidly advancing into Yuan army frontline camps and seizing supplies along the way (note that at this point, the Yuan army has the advantage in both troop numbers and supplies)

in the grander scheme of things, Zhang Liao's feat, cool it may have looked, is but a bright spark in a larger process

Xiahou Dun and Xiahou Yuan feeling the exhilaration of war, Dynasty Warriors style (because they're winning and the morale bar is high and the BGM switches to something energetic) is enabled by well-executed maneuvers under the right conditions, plus schemes implemented behind the scenes

Ravages repeatedly drills this point, to the point of merely presenting clashes in truncated form (almost as snapshots, rather than play by play accounts) while zeroing in on the plans

(Notice how Guo Jia noticed troops better than the experienced warrior, Zhang Liao - this, as usual, emphasizes the fact, that brain operates the physical strength)

the first round between Yuan Fang and Guo Jia aptly illustrates how superiority in numbers is relative to location

overall, the Yuan army still outnumbers the Cao army, but in this instance, given Guo Jia's lightning raids, Zhang He and Yuan Fang arrive at the scene having to assemble scattered and demoralized remnants against a well-oiled strike force that didn't suffer too many casualties

amusingly, Zhang He tells Chen Feng that they're going to 'fight to the death', only for Yuan Fang to say a chapter later that they're not going to fight to the death

(the context of course is different, the first being a pep talk, the second being a tactical instruction)

anyway, before I dive into the first round, I'll first skip into 324 to discuss the fallout

from a military standpoint, Yuan Fang did not need to engage in a high-risk showdown with Guo Jia (as there could have been other ways to drive back the Cao army once the Yuan army reinforcements have arrived into the scene not to mention that the scheme to induce Liu Pi to rebel in Runan did not depend on Yuan Fang beating Guo Jia)

that being said, one can argue that the showdown was partly to boost morale (to compensate for the deaths of Yan Liang and Wen Chou), and also to win over support for the internal power struggle (once again reminding us that in Ravages, there is more going on than just the battles)

with Yuan Fang retaking the momentum, the Cao army is demoralized and had to withdraw a bit, with the Yuan army beginning to assault Cao Cao's main headquarters (using siege towers and fire arrows, among other contraptions), while the imperial capital under Cao Cao's custody is threatened by a rebellion nearby (thereby limiting reinforcements and supplies from reaching the frontlines and preventing Xun Yu, Jia Xu, and Guo Jia from working together)

basically the Yuan army is playing it both ways, by enlisting the (northern) Taiping sect to stir up former yellow turban units, while rallying under the banner of restoring Han authority from Cao Cao's usurpation (this paradoxical combination is best illustrated by the meeting between Liu Bei and Liu Pi)

perhaps Liu Pi is among those who had to submit to Cao Cao but was not formally incorporated into the Qingzhou army, and basically just stayed in Runan

note also the difference in date

it was June (or the sixth month) of 200 when Yuan Fang clashed with Guo Jia shortly after Wen Chou's defeat, and it was July (or the seventh month) of 200 when Yuan Fang unleashed the multi-front assault on Cao Cao

one of the little things I like about Ravages would be its depiction of planning sessions of various shapes and sizes, highlighting on a visual level the importance of schemes in the series

time to discuss the showdown

Guo Jia's army is 3 times the size of Yuan Fang's army (prior to the arrival of Yuan army reinforcements), not to mention that Guo Jia has a greater number of senior officers whereas Yuan Fang can only rely on Zhang He and a bunch of deputies

I've mentioned before that Guo Jia would have better chances of winning (before the arrival of Yuan army reinforcements) had he gone all in and used a more aggressive approach (basically relying more on the tactical judgments of his officers since he himself lacks mobility and can't engage in combat), but instead he tried to play it cool and attempted a methodical entrapment procedure (which makes it easier for Yuan Fang to split up the Cao army, given that the troop disparity is not as overwhelming as, say, 5 to 1)

to be fair, Guo Jia's approach could still work against less insightful commanders with troops that aren't sufficiently trained in styles that can be flexibly combined to fend off numerically superior opponents... but he's up against his senior classmate, who happens to be both a good schemer and commander

In a friendly sense, he wanted to completely disrespect senior classmate, as he is rather comptetitive (we've seen this before in how he wanted to compete against Zhuge Liang in the first Xuzhou arc). To highlight "friendly" - Guo Jia may be ruthless, but he was not really planning to kill Fang. Fang, on the other hand, had a killing intent from get-go.

this segment is partly about Yuan Fang showing disdain for the methods of Sunzi (and a reminder to readers that there are other thinkers and manuals aside from Sunzi)

however, I should note that the Art of War of Sunzi says many things (some of which Yuan Fang ends up applying in essence) and is more of a handy guidebook rather than a systematic treatise (so it's not as if Yuan Fang attacks all the lessons wholesale, he just thinks the package is overrated and shouldn't be treated as canonical - similar with how Chen Mou views Three Kingdoms' historical records and novels, is not it?)

to the first troop he recommends the use of the Military Records (a manual that is lost, but the fragments of which are allegedly quoted in other ancient texts such as the Zuo Commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals)

The Military Records say: When you know yourself to be in difficulties, then withdraw.

this snippet is explicitly contrasted to the part of the Art of War that speaks about fighting to the death in desperate ground... and yet, there is another part (quoted in another chapter of Ravages) that goes as follows

Master Sun's Art of War says: Cast them into perdition and they will survive; plunge them into deadly situations, and then they will live.

if one thinks about it, Yuan Fang didn't say to his troops to retreat, instead he pushed his troops to fight on despite the odds

tactically, the message then seems to be, do not try to make a last defensive stand but fight flexibly, ceding ground when needed so as to preserve troop strength

that is to say, Yuan Fang is simply not seeing the current battlefield as fatal ground (one of the terrain classifications in the Art of War, when troops literally have no way out other than going all out) since after all he's just buying time for reinforcements.

basically the second troop (as well as the third) is trained in a style that weaponizes the teachings of Laozi (a reminder that theoretical musings and reflections can be appropriated and manipulated as apparatuses of warfare and statecraft)

there's a section in the Daodejing/Tao Te Ching that talks about reversing polarities and calls such approaches and processes 'wei ming' [微明] (diminishing/hiding the light)

The Old Master says: That which is to be condensed must first be dispersed. ... That which is to be obtained must first be yielded.

now read alongside the situation, I've come to realize that one can interpret these cryptic words in two ways (I noticed the first earlier, the second much later)

on a tactical level, Yuan Fang seems to be suggesting that rather than holding ground, the troops should instead expand the space by which they could maneuver (so that they can easily fall back when needed without feeling cornered), which explains the emphasis on seizing advantageous grounds and adopting an aggressive (but not too reckless) posture

on a more strategic level, the battle enables the Yuan army to take back the momentum that has been momentarily yielded (when Yan Liang and Wen Chou lost and died), to cut the Cao army down to size after the initial expansion

note that the emphasis of the instructions is not so much the use of specific formations (which at any rate seldom remain intact upon the actual collision of troops), but the choice of 'doctrine' or 'heuristic'

the fourth troop is also given instructions to prioritize the Military Records over the Art of War of Sunzi (though in this case I'm not quite sure which portion is being contrasted to)

The Military Records say: Anticipate your enemy, and you take away his heart.

I suppose this once again emphasizes the aggressive posture, the idea of striking first and stunning the enemy (drawing first blood rather than delivering a knockout)

and indeed when Yuan Fang ordered the troops to advance, Guo Jia and his officers were stunned at the sheer audacity

in sum Yuan Fang initially controls four main troops, with two using the Military Methods and the other two using Laozi, while Zhang He's unit serves as the vanguard using the methods of Guanzi

Master Guan says: When the weapons have been perfected and the instructions implemented, you may overtake fugitives and pursue the fleeing like a whirlwind, beat and stab like thunder and lightning.

I don't know how this is supposed to describe a particular tactical procedure since on its face the passage is more about how enforcement and victory flow from adequate preparation (maybe Zhang He is just bragging that he can quote from the classics too, haha), but perhaps the emphasis is on the metaphors of whirlwind and lightning, which suggest quick strikes and rapid movements, in line with the general approach of maintaining flexibility and mobility while remaining aggressive on the field

perhaps one can sum up what Yuan Fang wants to convey with that adage by Muhammad Ali: float like a butterfly sting like a bee

Guo Jia's main disadvantage after all is that he can't command like a field general (not to mention he can't engage in combat and thus would be a liability when placed in the middle), and thus his troops would be less flexible insofar as they have to rely on his overall instructions (his officers can command, but they may not be able to keep up with Yuan Fang when it comes to coordinating the tactics of all the troops)

...so far I've spent so much time discussing just the preparatory phase, there's still the actual (rather confusing) clash to deal with...

to sum up, the engagement lasted around half a day, with Yuan Fang's mixed methods basically trolling Guo Jia (and goading him to take to the center so that he wouldn't easily notice the Yuan army reinforcements when they arrive)

not to mention we never really got to see the Feng Hou formation (four direct units, four indirect units) in action, since the chapter is all about the process leading up to it

Guo Jia and the other officers of the Cao army may have been able to flee before the formation was able to completely encircle them, though perhaps the escape resulted in many casualties

note how Guo Jia used his troops conservatively, leaving many in reserve for further movement (and since the emphasis is on entrapment, one can assume that part of the plan is to mobilize troops in a more dispersed manner so as to be able to hem in Yuan Fang)

Guo Jia responds by instructing Xiahou Dun to launch a deceptive formation and attack from the side (though given the slower rate of communication of the Cao army, the Yuan army under Yuan Fang's guidance can quickly come up with a counter)

perhaps the function of Yuan Fang's archery unit is to annoy the Cao troops and disrupt their formations

this corroborates my tactical interpretation of the weaponized Laozi saying, in that the Yuan army is expanding its space of maneuver via aggressive advances (so that there would be room to withdraw and regroup later if needed) rather than setting up rigid lines of defense against an incoming onslaught

meanwhile, even those having to hold the line at some advantageous grounds do so in a flexible manner to minimize casualties

given the hazy troop images plus the lack of diagrams (then again, how is one supposed to diagram all this properly since the Yuan army didn't adopt a conventional formation to begin

with) one doesn't get a clear idea which troops are where... all one can rely on are the speech bubbles conveying directions, but one would still be puzzled as to the distance and the size of the battlefield

key to Yuan Fang's victory is his mobile unit circulating all over the battlefield and conveying instructions to team leaders and troops

and since Guo Jia did not launch the troops in one concentrated front but instead opted to divide up the units in an attempt to envelop Yuan Fang (despite the numbers advantage not being that overwhelming), the result is that with calculated surprise strikes Yuan Fang was able to cut off the various units and deal with them one at a time

to be fair, had these reinforcements not arrived until much later, Guo Jia could have slowly overwhelmed Yuan Fang due to the numerical advantage (plus the quality of the Cao troops)

now some may complain that the battle was poorly depicted (mainly due to the lack of diagrams, haha), but I think it's important that readers consider the following counterpoints

first, diagrams of military encounters (or generally, diagrams and maps and models of any sort) are but simplifications and approximations of the dynamics at play, and to insist on a 'canonical' and 'authorized' rendering (rather than, say, have readers come up with their own versions), while making things more approachable, could risk superimposing a simplistic view of the situation on the ground

second, many accounts of ancient clashes in the central plains tend to focus on the tricks and machinations (or heroic deeds) rather than present details of formations (like what we read about in chronicles and annals about certain battles in western antiquity)

third, I think Ravages insists on cultivating some sort of 'fog of war' in the presentation of campaign developments that is at once lacking in visual crispness (that is to say, the recordings are always lo-fi and low-res except during panoramic scenes or closeups for character gimmicks) and oversaturated with verbal cues (reports, rumors, etc.)

rather than placing readers in a situation where they can easily survey what's going on (with the help of an infallible map from an all-knowing narrator), readers are thrust into the story world as listeners and decipherers picking up jammed signals with lots of interference from various sides

and I can't stress this hard enough... those who claim that Ravages is defective as a 'war series' (based on the usual conventions and expectations) miss the point of how it's more about the stratagems and intrigues crafted and mobilized in broader power struggles (that may include occasional scenes of battles and duels)

One could that that fog of war in Ravages of Time is what makes it really interesting imo

you honestly dont know the depth of the enemy in many circumstances and the fact that an entire army can appear behind you (this is china after all) and rain hundred of thousands of arrows onto you is a scary thought to behold

add in the fact that, false rumors could be at play due to an enemy ploy is also a key factor in determining strategic decisions and you have multiple high ranking generals making the most obvious military mistakes

if a complete view of the enemy could be seen, all their positions and equipment and situation, do anyone think that great mind like Cao Cao would fall into a bait like Red Cliff or even the set up by Jia Xu that cost his son

paradoxically, because everyone knows that not everything goes as planned (especially once the battles commence), they do what they can to delay the big acts and prepare for various scenarios

and the very attempts to make the playing field more predictable generate signals that make it less predictable (had they just gone all in without too much thinking, things would be over with real soon)

anyway, thus far after Yuan Fang's win against Guo Jia, the Cao army has been pushed back by the all-out assault of the Yuan army

Xun Yu has to deal with the defense of the Xu capital (as well as court intrigues), while Jia Xu has been sent to contain the uprisings in Runan (sparked by Liu Bei joining forces with Liu Pi)

thus Xun You and Sima Yi were sent to help out Guo Jia in the main battlefront

I didn't notice it that much previously, but the Guandu arc involves chunks of mini time skips, reminding us that major campaigns could span several fronts and last several months unlike the showdowns in Kingdom that get wrapped up in a matter of days or weeks

when Guo Jia clashed with Yuan Fang, it was just the sixth month...

I'd also like to note how the Guandu arc spends a considerable amount of time dealing with stuff outside the battlefield even while the campaign is going on

...imagine a war drama combined with elements of film noir (courtesy of Sima Yi's gangster misadventures as part of an elaborate decoy scheme)...

the arc (specifically, the updates in 325) provides an opportunity to look at the situation using the framework of the 'levels of war'

on the tactical level (at least in Cao Cao's military headquarters, since that's what's highlighted at this point) we see the Yuan army trying out various techniques and gimmicks to overwhelm the base, while the besieged Cao army responds with appropriate countermeasures

thus the siege towers sent to one side were repelled by catapults secretly constructed and delivered, while attempts to dig infiltration tunnels were countered by trenches... in the meantime, the Cao army was also able to launch an offensive of its own, by using Kong Kui as a decoy to distract Gao Lan, enabling Xu Huang and Shi Huan (who never gets to show up on-panel) to seize rations from Han Meng (once again I emphasize that the Yuan army happens to have an overwhelming advantage in troops and resources, so Cao Cao is doing relatively well to still be holding on)

on the operational level, Cao Cao's forces are stretched across various areas to defend against possible attacks by various hostile or suspicious factions (the rebels in Runan, Liu Biao, the Sun clan), thus the frontline bases in the north are forced to fend off the Yuan army onslaught with a serious handicap (meaning that Cao Cao has to make up for the disadvantage by means of sheer tactical resilience and diplomatic cunning as seen in the decision to award Sun Quan with a title, while waiting for the opportunity to launch a sneaky maneuver to turn the tide)

as for the Yuan clan, not only does it have a greater war chest, but it is also able to field a more cohesive invasion force (still stretched, but more coordinated, with better supply lines) given the lack of major threats on the other frontiers (so far, the advance into enemy territory has proceeded rather smoothly despite setbacks and blunders since the resource disparity helps the Yuan army absorb a few shocks here and there... the other hindrance though would come from factional intrigues from the inside)

on the strategic level, Cao Cao's game plan involves luring the Yuan army deep into hostile ground before cutting off the supplies and forcing a disastrous withdrawal, and thus insofar as the onslaught continues (to stall rather than succeed outright), the chance for victory remains

though on the surface the Yuan army seems to be relying on brute force to overcome all obstacles, the bigger plan involves inducing defections and betrayals within Cao Cao's camp (including the imperial clan), so as to render the frontline isolated while the rest surrender of their own accord

and this brings us to the heart of the matter (and why the factions have set things up to remain at a stalemate and pave the way for sneaky approaches)... Cao Cao needs to sabotage the Yuan army rations to win, but what better way for Yuan Fang to crush Cao Cao (and show to the others that the Yuan clan is supreme) than to lure the latter into a trap using the supply depot as bait

in short, the Guandu campaign in Ravages is an example of military theatrics (at the cost of so many lives) as a giant smokescreen for the underlying schemes

and speaking of costs, if soldiers have to pay with their lives, merchants (who exploit workers and swindle customers) are also roped into the mess as financiers (though unlike in contemporary times where creditors have almost all the leverage, this was a time when wealthy elites are at the mercy of warlords who borrow from them unless of course said elites have bribed everyone to take effective control)

sadly, those opposed to war (in this case, the Tian clan) tend to be seen as convenient targets to keep the war going

had the Guandu arc been longer, the Tian clan faction could have been fleshed out as its own group distinct from (but forced to ally with) Yuan Tan's faction...

on that note, Yuan Fang may have used the excuse that he's only in charge of the assault force to pin the blame on someone else (not Han Meng because he's too well-connected, haha) for the loss of the rations, but it could very well be that he had anticipated such a move but deliberately let it slide (and moreover welcomed it, so as to keep Cao Cao longer in the game for the deceptions to play out later)

here Cao Cao and Zhang Liao talk about how the character of warriors is partially reflected in the choice of weapons (Guan Yu is heavy-handed and single-minded so he uses a guandao, Lu Bu is two-faced so he uses a ji)

notable in the conversation is how Zhang Liao still refers to Lu Bu as his master (he too is bound by his own honor code, but has chosen to live on and serve Cao Cao... in that regard he is positioned as a student following in the footsteps of two different teachers, aptly illustrated in how he who has trained to use the ji is currently training to wield the guandao)

basically at the end of the day, Guo Jia's ruse failed and not even the death of Liu Bei's unnamed son was enough to pressure Guan Yu to stay (partly because Sun Qian, Liu Bei's envoy, insisted that kids are worth less than brothers)

this scene also reveals something about Liu Bei (and Guan Yu, Zhang Fei's motives for joining the brotherhood remain obscure though the spinoff novel offers a tease that may or may not be validated in the future)

so it would seem that of the peach garden bros, Liu Bei is the one most attached to the sworn brotherhood as a relationship (his benevolence may have darkened, his loyalty to Han may have weakened, but he can't let go of close comrades)

Guan Yu, while valuing the brotherhood, may be attached more to how it signifies and upholds virtue

and if the spinoff is to be believed, Zhang Fei values the brotherhood as a safe space where he could still have warm fuzzy feelings despite his sad past

in another note, Ravages omits the story of Guan Yu's return to Liu Bei (as narrated in the Romance), but inserts a brief nod to that by adding Zhou Cang in the story at this point

however, instead of being a former yellow turban rebel who submitted to Guan Yu, he is instead reinterpreted as another shady guy working for the Sima clan (although he has since joined Liaoyuan Huo)

and this is basically how shady schemes are carried out, with agents in the field, via networks of operatives collecting confidential secrets and disseminating disinformation

but to sum up the events in 326: Guan Yu plans to return to Liu Bei (and Cao Cao allows it), Jia Xu plans to ambush Guan Yu (to lure out Liu Bei), Liaoyuan Huo plans to bail out Guan Yu (by performing another hit)

all in all, pretty laid-back compared to the last chapter

oh right, volumes 41 and 42 have some of the nicest black texts that unfortunately aren't in the scanlated chapters

for 325

Some say, instead of letting one’s son inherit a bin of gold, pass on a book to him.
But there is also the saying, a head-full of books is worth less than a bag of money.

for 326

Some say, be open and candid. Yet others say, conduct in secret.

basically juxtapositions of 2 contrasting messages

in this chapter we meet Yang Qing, an honest dealer (his name 'qing' [清] even means 'clear' or 'pure')

funny how his words here provide a small hint for what's to be revealed, haha

Ravages makes it a point to remind us not just of how warfare hurts people high and low, but also of how elite clans with their own networks and associations can be found across many factions

the amusing thing is, the Yuan clan had to expend vast amounts of resources (wars are expensive after all) just to be able to signal to elites that the Yuan clan is the safer choice to place investments (which would then be used to recoup the costs and rebuild from the ashes but in such a way that doesn't really harm elite interests)

no wonder rebellions pop up every now and then especially during times of famine or disasters...

I feel bad for the Tian clan at this point

(I wonder what happened to Tian De after Cao Cao conquered the north... did Sima Yi find a way to keep his old classmate safe since Sima Yi seems to be gracious to those he considers friends)

it could be that the Tian clan's biggest political blunder is simply declaring loyalty to Yuan Shao (and not Yuan Fang), and opposing the war out of that sort of principled loyalty (even though Yuan Shao is ever so eager to hand over power to Yuan Fang)

I could imagine detractors exhausted with the Ravages scheming game to complain the way Xiahou Dun does, haha

another round, another layer, another long subplot...

meanwhile I act like Cao Cao delighted to see the contest between geniuses

Xun You doesn't get to shine as much (since he's not part of the 8), but these moments show that he is a capable schemer in his own right

too bad we don't get to witness all the tactics and techniques in their full glory, but so far in the chapter we've seen attempts to stack mud, as well as the use of siege ramps (in this case, a sky hanger variant... a sky cart variant has been shown in previous chapters)

the black text for 328 goes as follows

There is also the saying, it’s as dangerous as stacking eggs and as difficult as heading for the sky.

That moment when Yang got distracted by Sima, when it was Yang all along. Just like how he was saying, that people are distracted by the "meaning of life" and forget their own little lives

I just want to note at the outset, the Sima Yi subplot of the Guandu arc feels like stepping into a gritty hardboiled world of crime and corruption (almost as if Chen Mou is channeling those memories of watching HK police and gangster dramas or perhaps obliquely commenting on the dysfunctional political situation)

slander, bribery, blackmail, inheritance disputes, a honey trap fueling jealousy, fake arrests, espionage, all the way to abduction and assassination

some may complain that it's just to give Sima Yi (whose historical account doesn't mention him taking part in the campaign) more panel time and meddling space

but what I like about the subplot is not so much who's involved, but what actions are involved (and all this happening amidst ongoing heavy battles)

it's regrettable though that Yuan Xi's faction is underdeveloped in Ravages... all we know is that because of the marriage he sided with Yuan Fang, but after Yuan Fang's passing he sided with Yuan Shang

one small tidbit worth mentioning

sometimes even if the main figureheads of the rival factions would want to be chummy or at least remain on polite terms with another, the other problem is that those below would stir up discord for their own gain (this point is noted even in the latest chapter)

at the very least, Yuan Mai (the youngest legitimate son of Yuan Shao) dying early due to poison spared him from the infighting that is to come

to sum up the Yuan family crisis

Yuan Tan is the eldest and is favored by tradition to become head of the clan in the future (but his humiliating loss last time led to a loss in influence)

Yuan Shang is the third and is favored by certain influential factions (not to mention he didn't mess up as badly as Yuan Tan when it comes to military affairs)

Yuan Xi is the second but has given up on the power struggle after marrying Zhen Fu

Yuan Shao, while nominally the head of the clan, is letting all this happen so that Yuan Fang (his darling bastard, officially a 'nephew', and the chief controller of the campaign) will become hegemon of the north

the Xin and Guo clans of Hebei support Yuan Tan, the Shen and Feng/Pang clans of Hebei support Yuan Shang, the Xu clan of Hebei supports Yuan Fang, the Tian clan of Hebei is tactically allied with Yuan Tan but is more about opposing the war

considering that the three Yuan brothers each command portions of the army, their non-cooperation proves to be a big liability waiting to be exploited

329 also touches upon the matter of supplies, with Sima Yi not only offering to stop supplying Cao Cao, but also offering (false) information about Cao Cao's supply lines

this is meant to lure the Yuan army to continue advancing in the hopes of cutting Cao Cao's supplies (to give Cao Cao the chance to go after the Yuan army supplies)

essentially the campaign becomes something like capture the flag (but instead of flag, it's the rations depots and transport routes that count)

the black text for 329 quotes from a classic text (a collection of anecdotes of scheming set in the warring states period)

The Warring States Stratagems say:

If one associates with others because of money, the relationship will come to an end when his money runs out. If a woman satisfies a man with her beauty, the love will disappear when she is no longer pretty.

330 turns to the Runan subplot and ends with Jia Xu showing off his troll tactics

I've mentioned before how Ravages has already featured 35 of the 36 stratagems... all that's missing is a clear case of the empty fort, but it can be argued (this was stated by a former member here over a year ago) that what happened is a curious case of the empty fort in reverse (that is to say, an empty strike)

basically the empty fort stratagem is a specific case of misdirection and deception that involves an element of bluffing or psychological gamesmanship (the story in the Romance goes that Zhuge Liang is besieged and outnumbered but in response he orders the fort to appear lightly guarded while he appears calmly playing music to fool attackers into thinking that the fort has a hidden ambush given Zhuge Liang's reputation when in fact there isn't)

note that Runan commandery is close to the Xu capital, which is why Jia Xu was sent to suppress the uprising there (as the uprising continues, Gao Lan leads a portion of the Yuan army deep into Cao Cao's territory, closing in on Runan in a bid to cut off Cao Cao's supply lines based on Xu You's info provided by Sima Yi)

previously Jia Xu made his stated oath to defeat Liu Bei in 10 days (and publicized it to make Liu Bei and Liu Pi worry about the hidden ambush)

9 days after the public oath, both Liu Bei and Liu Pi are still hesitant to move, afraid that Jia Xu might get them... however, Liu Pi (who wasn't named in the oath) blinked first, suspecting (and rightly so) that the oath was a trick to allow Jia Xu to escort rations to the frontlines in Guandu

Jia Xu's reputation played a role, but the more crucial factor that allowed the trick to work is that for some reason, Liu Bei and Liu Pi did not coordinate their actions... could they be so worried that messengers would be taken out so easily, or that there are spies ready to report their every move?

it's not clearly stated how far the two rebel bases are to each other, but I suppose they're not close enough to facilitate a safe strategy meeting (not to mention it's not clear who answers to who, it seems both Liu Bei and Liu Pi are just collaborators with separate chains of command and spheres of influence)

Sun Qian made a good point that Jia Xu's trick means there won't be that many troops in the base that Jia Xu is supposed to protect (in that sense, there appears to be an indirect empty fort scenario insofar as Zhang Fei hesitates to attack, fearing there might be a trick... and there is, but for a different reason)

it's really important to stress that the major figures do not have a monopoly on good advice and decent proposals

and indeed Liu Pi was had (and Liu Bei was played for a sucker)

Liu Pi's reckless advance means that his base is exposed when Jia Xu makes his side attack, the supply convoy to Guandu (led by the reliable Li Dian) turns out to be real but is also meant to lure eager raiders into an ambush, and with Liu Pi in disarray and Liu Bei still on the defensive Jia Xu is then free to attack Gao Lan, the target of the written version of the oath

in a master stroke Jia Xu disrupted the line of communication between Liu Bei and Liu Pi, and prevented Gao Lan's troop from regrouping with the Runan rebels and planning a coordinated assault, and ensured that the rations will reach Cao Cao in Guandu

one thing that puzzles me though... why are the Runan rebels wearing Yuan army uniforms when they're supposed to be peasant militias or former yellow turban bands? (perhaps those uniforms were secretly smuggled, or Liu Bei donated them when he arrived to Runan, haha)

the black text in 330 refers to a quote from the Analects, segmented into 2 parts

Someone says, there are three friendships which are advantageous. He also says, and there are three which are injurious.

anyway, before tackling 331 and 333 (featuring the tale of two brothers) I'd first like to go over 332 and 334

much of the chapter involves shady business (Sima Yi effectively offering a bribe to Xu Yuan who is eager to embezzle military funds with Yuan Fang's tacit approval, Sima Yi spreading rumors to better blackmail Xu Yuan later, Xu You proposing a sham prosecution with Xu Yuan as the token defendant which would then be used as a pretext for Xu You to flee and fake being a defector, etc.)

on the grander side of the scheming, Sima Yi and Yuan Fang agree that the overall campaign against Cao Cao should downplay the role of imperial loyalist allies as much as possible (since empowering them would only empower the Han, and indirectly Liu Bei), with the expectation that the more opportunistic loyalists will cozy up to the Yuan clan anyway once the dust settles

on the military front, Shen Pei (Yuan Shang's adviser) rightly anticipates that Yuan Fang's arrangement facilitated Jia Xu's night raid

Yuan Fang in turn anticipates that Shen Pei would be cautious (due to ulterior motives), thus nullifying Jia Xu's plan to lure more reinforcements

Ravages emphasizes that the schemes are intertwined and operate across diverse fields and spheres (in this case, Yuan Fang plans to counter an emerging scandal by staging an event that would make the Yuan clan look impartial and benevolent, while giving his corrupt backers a good enough cover story to switch to the other team and spread disinformation and there are more twists to that which will be revealed in the next chapters)

now I'd like to think that Sima Yi sincerely cares for his old classmate and that this isn't part of a long con to control or destroy the Tian clan (after all, they could be good business partners, and the Sima clan did protect the Chen clan previously)

in another note, Sima Yi is basically advocating the elite and illuminati playbook of diversifying assets, maintaining a stake in various ventures, playing all sides in the shadows...

on a side note, Tian De (who at this point is pretending to be clueless and non-partisan) thinks he has lured Sima Yi to side with Yuan Tan, though this minor scheme doesn't matter much to Sima Yi, who I think wants to protect the Tian clan and secure a lasting business relationship

to be fair Sima Yi could have sided with Yuan Shang instead if that's who the Tian clan (or another friendly clan) is banking on for survival...

also, Sima Yi reminds readers that the Guandu campaign isn't necessarily a make or break moment for the Yuan clan (after all it would take several more years before Cao Cao consolidates his control over the north... too bad Chen Mou didn't spend much time on the post-Guandu pre-Chibi northern campaigns)

Tian De joins the exclusive list of people who have heard Sima Yi's master plan from the man himself, haha

when Sima Yi tells someone he wants revenge, it's part of a con... but when Sima Yi tells someone he wants to rise to power and earn enough trust for the long-term payback, it's part of a business proposal

one amusing thing about 334 is how much of it just happens on the streets of Ye, a colorful depiction of the shady schemes that lurk and occur in the bustling city

there's the shady intelligence officer with the straw hat, there's the shady driver of Tian De's carriage who happens to be a mysterious agent for Yuan Tan, there's the shady merchant receiving coded instructions for a special job... and then of course there's San Chuan dropping by to say HAI

before going to the tale of the two brothers, let's get the scheming details out of the way first

Guo Jia and Cao Cao discuss Sima Yi's message about infighting between 'two brothers' (the suspicion being that behind the loyal advice is a treacherous hint, that Sima Yi is making his own moves by getting close to Cao Pi)

other than Guo Jia reaffirming the need to pay attention to both big things and small things (the ethos I also endorse when it comes to reading Ravages), there's the interesting distinction made between 'ruling the world' and 'mere governance' (the amusing thing about this though is that using Guo Jia's reasoning, Cao Cao can't just usurp the imperial throne just because he's more capable, since that would stir unrest among loyalists and pretenders who claim to be even more capable)

this tidbit opens up new frontiers for further consideration

first, the tricky thing about 'meritocratic' or 'aristocratic' discourses on governance concerns the claim to excellence or talent... how are these qualities determined and identified, is there an absolute standard, is it all about people agreeing to a certain metric, who sets and interprets the parameters and criteria, and so many other questions follow

and then suppose setting the more theoretical matters aside the power players agree that merit in governance and rulership would also require passing the trials of power struggle (that is to say, those who deserve to govern/rule are those talented to both keep things in order and to seize control in times of disorder aptly expressed in the description of 'anti-hero in chaos, loyal minister in peace'), this is basically an invitation to endless contest since those at the top just happen to be the winners of the moment (on that note, this echoes the response of Xunzi to the famous saying by Mencius that anyone can be Yao and Shun)

perhaps the problematic category is the elevated notion of rulership (and its implicit correlates or stability and pacification), and that at the end of the day it's about perpetuating hegemony and domination rather than receiving a mandate to exercise legitimate authority... but if so, why even bother to fight for a throne, or on that matter to bring all under heaven to one rule

Burden of choice would also be on the shoulders of his children.

perhaps the cautionary note here is, one cannot exercise power over many just by appealing to sheer technical dominance (since the only lesson to be learned from that is the ruler just happens to have reached the top and someone else can reach it), and that ideological finesse is needed (thus the use of loyalty discourse, lineage discourse, etc.)

to return to the topic of virtue, ultimately one's practice of virtue on paper does not depend on who claims to rule the world (the sunny side of the Xunzi quote about heaven behaving constantly is that if everyone is called to be virtuous, then the responsibility remains whether there's a sage king or a petty tyrant)

then maybe the problem is not so much talent or virtue (however construed), but trying to connect it to governance or domination not as a voice holding power to account, but as a fig leaf of excuses and alibis

of course the more cynical and amoral 'legalist' thinkers such as Han Feizi would just say that people have to be controlled and disciplined to produce items of value (and this is best done by propping up a singular authority that lays down the law), haha

anyway, moving on to another scene (those who want to ruminate and speculate more about the topics above can discuss in memorylane or better yet read more books on the matters at hand)

the siege continues after a momentary truce to bury the dead, and the Yuan army makes use of another tactic (digging holes not to create infiltration tunnels, but to collapse the foundations of walls)

Li Dian reports to Cao Cao about potential defectors and insiders, a useful reminder that the power struggles are not just about winning battles (though the dynamics of those battles are among the things to be calculated when dealing with broader schemes)

the black text for 331 features a quote from the Xunzi and the Analects

Some say, choose the right environment to settle in and look to the right people to travel with. Men of different paths cannot plan for one another.

meanwhile, the black texts for 333 and 334 form a parallel pair

A bustling world is made up of people seeking to benefit themselves.

A disorderly world is made up of people leaving for greener pastures.

oh well, as we know, family is a recurring theme in this arc and we can talk about it with Yuan Fang's help. Remember Yuan Fang just wanted a normal life, but as Yuan Shao said, its not really possible, because if not your ambitions, ambitions of others will affect your life and not let you live the life you long for.

That was proved in this few scenes, as they did not really have anything else to do, if they wanted to survive, they had only one, forced, path. Notice they do not even have faces drawn properly, they are just masked. That nail's the point, that this arc is not about concrete individuals.

you could see that his brother's death actually affected him, if he did not show the signs. he went for Dun exactly and was actually overwhelming the big guy

So even if he did not really have anything to take care of, he at least had emotions, just like Fang

Their outfit is quite similar and I dare say, their fatal blows are also similar. except Fang was stabbed from behind

Sneaky Guo Jia actually talking about THREE pair of brothers at the same time . (we may as well count him and Fang as brothers, which would make it four pair, actually).

before resuming, I'd like to note something about what Yuan Fang said at the end of 332

With the rations at Wuchao, I'll burn him alive.

note that he doesn't say that the burning of Cao Cao has to happen in Wuchao (only that Wuchao will play a role in that) and even assuming that Wuchao gets set on fire, he doesn't say that it's Cao Cao who gets burned there (only that Cao Cao will be burned somehow)

amusing how this works well in hindsight

and about the tale of the two brothers, one of the little things in Ravages that I like are scenes focusing on conversations and struggles of non-famous people (I wanted to say 'ordinary', but a few such portions involve elites)

who remembers the kid who didn't listen to his mom? or the loyal soldier about to be executed in front of his wife and mom? or what about the refugee Zhang with his wife and infant child? or the moments where commoners are chatting in dining places?

let us review the state of play in Guandu thus far

the Cao army is fending off a full-scale assault by the Yuan army, which has the overwhelming advantage in troops and resources

the Cao army plans to stall the Yuan army longer and lure enemy troops deeper into hostile ground, then force a disastrous withdrawal by going after the rations depots and launching surprise counterattacks

the Yuan army plans to besiege the Cao army further and exert pressure on nearby allies, then force a widespread defection by cutting off the supply lines and isolating the frontline bases

Sima Yi offers to collaborate regarding Cao army supplies as bait, while trying to extract information about Yuan army supplies

Yuan Fang in turn dangles information about Yuan army supplies as bait, so that when Cao Cao falls for the trap the rest of the troops can proceed smoothly with the invasion

and it must be highlighted, the reason the Cao and Yuan camps can play this game is because both make use of backchannels and shadowy networks (that is to say, even as the soldiers and commanders are fighting hard, agents and operatives are keeping in touch and deceiving one another)

one amusing tidbit: it seems the henchmen under Jia Kui's dad (perhaps those directly watching over and reporting to Sima Yi) and the minions under Jia Kui (those who received Sima Yi's coded order to conduct the abduction and the assassination) are working separately(edited)

and no story of corruption and deceit is complete without a sham arrest conducted for show, haha

I still can't get over how Cao Hong, a veteran of many wars, is so unnerved by Jia Kui's shady ways

in another note, I wonder if the deluxe volumes will give a name to the hat-wearing goon with fancy clothing

basically as part of Yuan Fang's plan, the Xu clan is officially indicted of embezzlement (with assurances that the ringleaders will get off the hook at the end of the day)

this gives Xu You the cover to flee to Cao Cao (his old classmate) and offer believable disinfo, while throwing Sima Yi under the bus (what he doesn't realize though is that Sima Yi has a backup plan, arranging the death of Xu Yuan and the abduction of Xu You's sons)

And, of course, another hint for upcoming twist of Yang.

I just want to say, what makes the Ravages rendition of the Guandu campaign (and generally, the power struggles in the period) stand out among 3K adaptations is just how shady it all is (especially if one notices the sheer number of chapters devoted to the stratagems and intrigues within and beyond the battlefield, while the clashes are given abridged coverage)

no wonder those who are expecting more to witness the glory and cunning of team Cao overcoming the odds in battle are frustrated, haha

even while the betrayals and backstabs about the supplies are going on, there's also the struggle to inherit the mantle of Yuan clan head

we don't know if Yuan Shao really planned to have another clan relative adopt Yuan Tan (to preemptively take him out of consideration as heir), but the mere dissemination of the rumor may have been a minor scheme to goad Yuan Tan into action, to lure him to the fray (by dangling the opportunity to take down Cao Cao and retake the glory)

considerations such as this one help explain why Yuan Fang bothered to play a convoluted game instead of just launching a straightforward campaign (after all, the Yuan clan has the advantage in numbers and resources and could simply outlast and outgun Cao Cao in a costly showdown of attrition)

meanwhile, the campaign situation (with Cao Cao severely outnumbered, with exhausted bases having to deal with rotating troops of the Yuan clan) is set up in such a way that leaves a glaring two-way street, for Xu You to pretend to be a useful defector, and for Cao Cao to march to Wuchao

both Yuan Tan and Yuan Shang (and their respective advisers) at least have the wits to notice such a glitch (and come up with their own plans to ambush Cao Cao), but what they don't realize is that the whole setup is also meant as bait for them

I suppose one can describe this meeting between old classmates as a high-stakes negotiation (though Cao Cao actually has all the trump cards) where both sides are trying to gauge who will blink first

it's amusing how while Cao Cao keeps probing where the rations are, Xu You keeps needling when the supplies will run out (little did he know)

considering what we know as to how this all ends, let's take a step back and analyze what would have happened had Cao Cao believed his former classmate

suppose he targets Wuchao using Xu You's treacherous information, there would still be room for Cao Cao to unleash the night riders and cause a distraction that would allow the raiding party to reach the target (though in this case the Yuan army has also set up countermeasures for that and the only thing that would be ruined is the hidden plan)

but what's disturbing to note is, if Cao Cao had been informed by Guo Jia of the real game from the start, why did he even bother to torment an old classmate to maintain appearances? I'd like to think that at this point, Guo Jia (and his trusted agents) would still be concealing certain details even from Cao Cao (until days before the clash) so as to prevent leaks

surely Cao Cao isn't so heartless so as to cause someone pointless anguish...

on a side note, the chapter also brings up the topic of the three ways of scheming (I suppose in this case the Yuan brothers are using the first mode, Cao Cao is using the second, and Yuan Fang is using the third)

the black text of 336 quotes from Wang Chong

A song being beautiful, people are not all able to chime in, and a statement being true, not all believe it.

basically a hint that not everyone can see the deeper schemes

how did Yuan Shang know that Cao Cao is set to attack Gushi instead of Wuchao? spies and messengers abound

how is Yuan Shao not in the loop? hmm...

if we recall, based on the setup outlined in 336, Yuan Shang is in charge of keeping Jia Xu in check, so the deliberate withdrawal allowed Jia Xu to target Gao Lan (though it's not quite clear where Jia Xu is originally positioned or how close it was to Gao Lan's position)

it's nice to see Shen Pei see through Yuan Fang's con with regard to Xu You (after all, it's very curious to note that Xu You didn't take his sons with him when he went to Cao Cao... perhaps Yuan Fang assured their security but in the end deliberately allowed Jia Kui's goons to abduct them)

and if one thinks about it, with the Xu clan out of the picture, Yuan Fang no longer needs to uphold the bargain of restoring the wealth of the clan after the sham investigation, haha

with regard to the trap setup, clearly the Yuan army knows that neither Wuchao nor Gushi contain the supplies, so the main issue is where to lure Cao Cao

Xu You (who may not be in charge of all the supplies) could have been kept in dark about the main depot, but is duped into believing that Gushi is the real deal while instructed to lie to Cao Cao that the supplies are in Wuchao (for this to work out, perhaps some supplies may have been temporarily placed in Gushi and also Wuchao before secretly moved elsewhere, thus the false impression though there would still be issues with how to keep the transfer secret from spies)

that way, when threatened to confess, his admissions (a result of disinfo) would appear genuine

ultimately for Yuan Fang's con to work he would need to set up parallel layers of communication (notice for instance the coded messages entrusted to Xu You to be leaked to Cao Cao for the plan to fall in place), with one solely for the purpose of fooling the enemy (and fortunately the wealth and manpower of the Yuan clan is at his disposal... the benefits of being an affluent schemer, haha)

imagine if Guo Jia or Zhuge Liang had that much on their hands...

anyway, as Cao Cao prepares to raid Gushi using troops dressed as Yuan army troops (I think at this point he would have been informed of the deep scheme already and is just playing along), and as Yuan Shang and Yuan Tan prepare to ambush Cao Cao... the setup for Yuan Fang's ultimate scheme is in place

it's glaring to see how Yuan Shao doesn't even know what the next step will be (there's a reason for that, but I suppose Yuan Shao himself didn't bother to pry and just let Yuan Fang control military matters even though he's the nominal 'great general' in this campaign)

this also says something about the military structure in later Han, with controllers and chief controllers (rather than generals and chief generals) becoming more prominent in handling the operations

one would feel bad for those of the old guard who are still loyal to Yuan Shao, as they see him eagerly letting Yuan Fang control everything

now, regarding the night riders... perhaps this unit is an honor guard composed mainly of veterans from the old days (imagine those who were with Cao Cao from the days of the Guandong Alliance, which means those who have 'trained' with him the longest in those early defeats) and used to conducting, well, night missions

meanwhile, the Tiger and Leopard Cavalry may be the more prestigious elite unit that is more rigorous in personnel selection (on that note, it would have been nice to see Cao Chun in action in the arc as well, but maybe he was assigned to guard the south)

these side details aside, 338 is mainly about Cao Cao tricking Yuan Tan and Yuan Shang into fighting one another (so that he and his night riders can proceed to Gushi unopposed... or so they think)

had the two brothers not been feuding, the disaster could have been averted with proper communication channels... but then again, Yuan Fang's ultimate plan hinges on these two brothers not cooperating with each other

another reminder that the power struggle isn't just about the feats on the battlefield

even as Cao Cao is on his way (with redhare cavalrymen) to raid Gushi, Yuan Fang's minions are already plotting to spread accusations about Yuan Tan and Yuan Shang in the home base

this is the moment when the masks begin to come off

notice the confident look in those three as they discuss about the plan

regardless of the outcome of this battle
... as if winning at Guandu didn't matter, as if the campaign was some sort of charade, as if the goal was something else altogether

and we approach the climax of the arc

before going through the first big twist, I first want to talk about Yuan Shao's dysfunctional family life

he blames his other sons for being 'inadequate' (Yuan Tan being capricious, Yuan Xi resting on his laurels, Yuan Shang being too trusting of a certain conniving relative I wonder who he is referring to here) but he is as much accountable for what they have become, given that he allowed all this to happen to pave the way for Yuan Fang (and what's more, he broke Yuan Fang, turned him to the dark side combining the ways of Darth Vader and Uchiha Itachi to become what he is)

they were still kids over ten years ago

we didn't see Yuan Tan and Yuan Xi on-panel at that time (perhaps Yuan Mai wasn't born yet), but we did get to see Yuan Fang and Yuan Shang

Yuan Shu's ambition to become emperor of his own regime (literally just living the childhood dream based on the flashback in 289) comes off as harmless compared to what Yuan Shao has unleashed, haha

who remembers Dong Zhuo condemning the elites for plunging the realm into unrest? who remembers Liu Bei pointing out the dangers of ambition? who remembers Cao Cao highlighting the need for loyalists to take power and suppress the corrupt? who remembers Sun Ce denouncing the hypocrisies in the power struggle?

Yuan Shao in many ways is at the apex of these structural problems (he doesn't control them at the end of the day, but he benefits from the perpetuation of the crisis), and Yuan Fang the bastard king of the north is the fruit of the poisonous tree

detour aside, time to discuss the big trick

thus far readers have been led (by the nose) to believe that Yuan Fang's master plan is focused more on the external issue (Cao Cao is dangerous to be allowed to thrive after all), with the power struggle for complete control of the Yuan clan as more of a long-term objective to be accomplished later (after all, with Yuan Shao as his chief enabler, what has he to worry)

but instead the Guandu campaign is turned on its head... the battles are but a scam (with Cao Cao losing seen as a side quest), an excuse to cleanly wipe out Yuan Shao (as well as Yuan Tan and Yuan Shang) all in one go, to fulfill a long-held vendetta and finally take the reins

I suppose in this calculation, Yuan Fang may have thought that once he's firmly in charge, Cao Cao wouldn't be able to conquer the north even if the latter ended up winning the theatrical battle of Guandu

one would still wonder how it all went so well, and so we turn our attention to the details in the burning of Gushi and Wuchao

Zhang He and Gao Lan stationed in locations that made it easier for them to set fire to Gushi without Cao Cao noticing until it's too late

Yuan Shao was made to remain in Wuchao (now converted into a support base given that Cao Cao activated the trap in Gushi), while Yuan Tan and Yuan Shang (who botched their attempts to ambush Cao Cao because of a clever trick on Cao Cao's part) head to Wuchao to blame one another in front of Yuan Shao

the key player is Yuan Xi (misguided by Duan Jian and Yang), in charge of the unit conveniently mobilized at an earlier time (and thus not informed of the fire trap at Gushi, with outdated orders to burn Wuchao to trap Cao Cao there)

meanwhile, many of the confused guards (apparently not aware that the one leading the attack is Yuan Xi) mistake the situation for another attack by Cao Cao's troops (since they've heard about the debacle with Yuan Tan and Yuan Shang)

when you have hopes for someone, but he is actually worse than people say, haha

I know he's a backstabber, but he isn't that heartless now, is he

Much needed positivity... is it possible, though?

if Yuan Xi had been more proactive about knowing what's going on, he wouldn't have been played like a fiddle (though one suspects that even then, Yuan Fang would have agent provocateurs carry out the deed if Yuan Xi isn't willing to)

looking back, let's recall one of Yuan Fang's early con games, against the Guandong Alliance

the plan he proposed made sense (trick Lu Bu into thinking the situation isn't that desperate) and was workable (provided the generals didn't lose their lives in duels against Hua Xiong)

however, the assumption is that the Yuan clan would fully cooperate with the alliance (and not throw the other warlords under the bus) when the time came to launch the counterattack

" Even the eagle’s nest gets taken "

talk about being an Apex

similarly, the strategic and operational calculations for the Yuan army as a whole for the Guandu campaign were workable (though the glitches here and there suggest that something else is being cooked up)

but the assumption is that Yuan Fang isn't actually planning to kill off his dad and brothers, haha

the plan to lure Cao Cao into a trap using disinfo about the rations depot made sense (since Cao Cao's own plan hinges on taking out the rations depot)

the plan to put intense pressure on the frontlines while sending extra troops to cut off supply lines and force surrenders and defections made sense (since the Yuan army has the overwhelming numbers advantage, not to mention the number of insiders and opportunists at the back and in the court)

and precisely because the plans made sense that Yuan Shao, Yuan Tan, and Yuan Shang came on board, not realizing the whole show provided an excuse to kill them off(edited)*[19:14]***this also partly explains why the Guandu arc can be rather polarizing (especially for those who are in it for the epic clashes and the primacy of battlefield situations, since Ravages upends all that and resolutely reaffirms the supremacy of the scheming game while still acknowledging that in the last instance it's people power fueling the conspiracy machine, people power that must be controlled using various sorts of morale management gimmicks)**

Interesting how Yuan Shao's side is all about family, yet it is the most dysfunctional one, while Cao Cao's side is more concerned about the country, yet they have the most functional families. Then comes Yang from Yuan's side and Cao gets problem in his family, haha.

Guandu can also be summerised as - deconstruction of familial love vs. deconstruction of country's love (by being anti-heroes, rather than heroes)

with the burning of Wuchao and Gushi, Yuan Fang is in the process of dealing with both Yuan Shao and Cao Cao

meanwhile the rest of the Yuan army proceeds with the all-out assault, while counting on potential defectors and opportunists to make their move and ensure the collapse of the Cao army

before going over the clash in Gushi, I'd first like to attend to what's going on in the other fronts, beginning with Cao Cao's main headquarters at Guandu under heavy siege

I must emphasize here how great the advantage of the Yuan army is, even if pound for pound the troops and officers of the Cao army are superior overall

and it's not as if the Yuan army is blindly throwing troops without a plan simply because the commanders can afford to waste lives

note that there are moles within the Cao army main camp, aiding the infiltration unit composed of Taiping sect members... this would serve to weaken the defenses at the interior and keep the reserve units preoccupied so that those assaulting the defense barriers would have an easier time

aside from the covert collaborators, there are also resentful mutineers openly switching sides and attacking key points

and with the rations targeted, even if Cao Cao somehow escapes Yuan Fang's grasp, there wouldn't be much to salvage unless something happens that forces the Yuan army to stop and fall back...

and I suppose Guo Jia was able to grandstand a bit because the enemies have yet to reach the portion of the wall he's standing on, haha

some readers may have been eager to see several consecutive chapters showcasing the sheer determination and martial ingenuity of team Cao defending the main camp, but this is Ravages where schemes take precedence over showdowns, which brings us to the next subplot...

even as the frontline bases of the Cao army are already enduring tremendous pressure, the Yuan army has enough troops to open another more crucial area of operation, in line with the plan to cut off Cao Cao's supply lines, isolate the frontlines, and force a surrender in the imperial capital and other nearby areas

and this is where the opportunistic court officials come in, the bugs that have remained because they kept a low profile during previous purges (since they weren't closely associated with Lu Bu or Dong Cheng)...

in another note, how I wish Liu Xie (and the people in the imperial court) show up more often in Ravages, since they can come up with schemes of their own

anyway, Liu Xie engages in a bit of banter with the opportunists (particularly Cao De, who tried to disassociate himself from 'Xiahou Cao' and was told that the Cao clan which is associated with the eunuchs due to Cao Cao's adoptive granddad wouldn't be as prestigious were it not for Cao Cao's deeds)

one notable thing about scenes involving Liu Xie is the utter lack of decorum befitting the son of heaven (which goes to show how much the Han has declined) - feel free to compare it to how Yuan Shu was into decorations.

instead of a formal audience (where people in attendance have to wear certain uniforms and follow protocols, where the emperor sits on the throne in a large hall), all we get are these informal (dare I say casual) side sessions where a few select people talk to him for a while, then another batch comes in at another time (of course emperors have the privilege to engage in these meetings, but it seems that in Ravages, that's all Liu Xie is shown to do)

and to add insult to injury, Cao Ren just barges in with troops to prevent the sellouts from escaping (I suspect though that with Xun Yu's grand entry, this whole event may have been a charade and that Xun Yu and Liu Xie discussed matters beforehand to fully expose the opportunists)

just to show what I mean when I say that Ravages lacks court hearings (though this example I'm showing involves Cao Cao ignoring protocol at his own pleasure too)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rduLDVCBZ4k

Liu Xie showing up depends on Cao weakness or the high losing possiblity he knows when to pick a time to stir things up

Cao Cao's insult aside, the video showcases how ministers in attendance have to dress and behave in a certain way (not sure how anachronistic the details are, but the point is the contrast between that and what we see in Ravages)

even Kingdom has more court sessions in those awards ceremonies (though the details are blatantly anachronistic, haha)

amusingly enough, the one who got to hold a nice audience (but still without the elaborate rites) is Yuan Shu, when Xun You visited him to prevent the collaboration with Lu Bu

before reassuring Liu Xie, Xun Yu also berates the other ministers for lacking principle as loyalists and being merely opportunistic in their counsel (since they get to benefit the most when Yuan Shao is recognized as hegemon and protector of the realm)

the more notable tidbit though is how Xun Yu acknowledges that even loyalists are at the mercy of the times and would have to make pragmatic choices on which faction to support to uphold the rule of Han... in that sense, he too is like the other ministers, being swept by the circumstances beyond their control (the only difference being that he stuck to his principles even while helping Cao Cao instead of just following the short-term trends)

ultimately, key to Liu Xie's current alignment (suboptimal it may be though I wonder how he would have responded if Pang Tong the master persuader had been able to reach out to him before Liu Chong's assassination) are two factors

first, he trusts Xun Yu who in turn has chosen to give Cao Cao a chance

second, he trusts Yuan Shao less than Cao Cao (perhaps he remembers a few lessons from Dong Zhuo)

and considering that the Yuan army relies on these networks of insiders and collaborators to advance deep into Cao Cao's territory, Xun Yu plans to counter that by asking Cao De to craft a poisoned letter that will lead the invading force into a trap

now I think the disinfo would have merely resulted in longer travel time along disadvantageous routes, plus a few ambushes here and there (and considering that Guo Yuan is in charge of the advance, it's likely he'd be able to manage things somewhat)

perhaps if the situation continued without a breakthrough, this would end up becoming a race between Cao Cao finding the real rations depot and the Yuan army capturing the Xu capital or breaking through the headquarters at Guandu

but at the very least, Xun Yu's intervention prevented Cao Cao's forces from suffering a massive internal collapse, and thus helped keep the fight going (the important thing for the Cao army is still to force the Yuan army to withdraw by targeting the rations, and since Wuchao and Gushi turned out to be fire traps, something else needed to happen)

the black text of 343 quotes from a classical text

Song Yu says:

Classical music is too lofty, and too difficult of comprehension, for the masses.
a hint that there's a deeper scheme that few could see coming, that there are more surprises to turn the tide

anyway, in preparation for the discussion of the showdown between Cao Cao and Yuan Fang, I suggest brushing up on chapter 5 of the Art of War of Sunzi (what's important to take note of are not so much the specific tactics because the situation on the ground isn't depicted clearly and the dynamics are even hazier than Guo Jia vs Yuan Fang but the maxims and heuristics invoked in the chapters)

https://ctext.org/art-of-war/energy

fortunately 341 kicks off with something relatively simple, with Cao Cao and his riders breaking free from the fire trap, and accepting Yuan Fang's challenge to engage in another round

now some may laugh at how gimmicky the sword formation is, but this visual cue (plus the chosen quotes) would help frame the current situation and provide hints about what's to come

Yuan Fang compares his welcoming array to that of a bow (and it helps that in 339 Cao Cao's riders were confronted with battle-ready archers the moment they first stepped out of the burning camp), while Cao Cao arranges his troops in a sword-like formation (gimmick aside, the idea is to form a narrow column and break out in an orderly fashion, with a thin outer layer of troops bearing the brunt of the flame)

take note of the imagery: in a previous black text Yuan Fang was indirectly likened to someone who shoots eagles (coveting all under heaven)

meanwhile, we've seen the sword formation before, and it's when Zhang Liao (who as we know repeatedly boasts of how no one can survive the reach of his sword) used it to block the advance of the Sun clan in the later part of the surprise attack on Cao Cao... this clues us in that Zhang Liao is part of the raiding party

now for the quotes

there's the passage from the Han Feizi that talks about how the aggressiveness of fire acts as a repellent (the chapter doesn't quote the follow-up passage about how water ends up harming more people in cases of flood because it doesn't sting as much, though I think one can extract the message about Cao Cao being more wary of Yuan Shao as the glaring threat but failing to adequately prepare against the deluge of schemes down the long river)

there's also the passage from the Qianfu Lun that talks about how we don't really know the sharpness of a sword that hasn't been used (and note again the imagery of a sword passing

through fire, as if it has just been freshly constructed and has yet to meet the trials of real battle)

this then brings us to the deliberate mention of Puyang (the campaign where Cao Cao 'trained' his troops for the eventual showdown against the Yuan clan), and thus in a way the match against the first of the eight geniuses can be seen as a graduation exam for Cao Cao and the geniuses under him, the last hurdle after years of painstaking efforts (in another note, just as the win in Puyang involved some sneaky schemes, we're clued in especially those of us familiar with the source texts that team Cao is about to unveil a surprising move to turn the tide)

for this clash Yuan Fang has the numerical advantage from the start (not to mention his troops didn't have to deal with the fire trap)

however, Cao Cao is better at commanding troops in battle than Guo Jia is, so the Cao army no longer has mobility issues

I'd also like to note that in the Guandu arc we never really get to see the full details of the Feng Hou formation (round 1 focuses on Yuan Fang buying time so it can be unleashed with the action happening off-panel, round 2 focuses on Cao Cao preventing the formation from being unleashed or at least delaying things long enough)

how could Cao Cao do that? this isn't Dynasty Warriors...

in a way the battle is also a test for Zhang Liao (to see how good he is at the guandao, to see how far he can go in Cao Cao's service) .

before I dive into the details, I'd like to offer some general remarks about the clash of formations

Zhang Liao posed as Cao Cao to distract and take out the commanders in charge of implementing the Feng Hou formation, though with Gao Lan and Zhang He nearby they are able to rally the troops and attempt to finish the formation setup

admittedly, the whole thing seems really hazy even though we get to see some tactical maneuvers here and there (and key to understanding what's going on would be the quotes used in the chapter)

time to contrast Yuan Fang's approach in round 1 with Cao Cao's approach in round 2

it seems that while Yuan Fang's aggressive and flexible style in round 1 is meant to confuse the numerically superior but less mobile enemy, Cao Cao in round 2 appears to be favoring a

more cautious style that emphasizes the use of surgical strikes on key enemy units in a bid to disrupt the attempted formation

I suppose as a visual metaphor, imagine an offensive 'drunken master' martial arts stance vis-a-vis a defensive boxing stance, haha

the chapter does include these little tricks (archers concealed directly behind shields to act as a surprise sniping force, launching flank attacks on enemy cavalry encircling a defensive position, etc.), but overall the clash is less about static formations and positions, and more about the skillful use of troop energy/momentum (this is where the Art of War comes in)

I'd like to note that Cao Cao's commentary on the Art of War of Sunzi is not so much a systematic theoretical treatise, but are more like study notes one scribbles while listening to a lecture or reading a book... nonetheless, they can be useful to officers on the field trying to extract workable interpretations and heuristics (applicable to the later Han) from an ancient text written generations ago

Yuan Fang's monologue praising Cao Cao's methods involves this quote from the Art of War:

Managing masses of troops is similar to managing a small group of soldiers; it is a question of division and enumeration.
(that is to say, the way to effectively channel the energy of a large mass is by coming up with clusters and circuits of subdivided small masses, unleashing necessary portions and holding others in reserve for follow-up movements... while this is a basic principle in all military organizations, I suppose Yuan Fang highlights how Cao Cao excels in organizing his troops into deadly teams)

the monologue brings up another quote:

Confrontation is done directly, victory is gained by surprise.
(this is one of the core tenets of Sunzi, the relationship between 'direct' and 'indirect' approaches similar to yin and yang though this is not to say that some moves are intrinsically direct while others are inherently indirect but rather, what counts as direct or indirect depends on how the situation is configured... as for why Yuan Fang would specifically bring this up, I guess it has to do with the tricks that Cao Cao has been using to prevent the Yuan army troops from unleashing the Feng Hou formation)

Yuan Fang also echoes a passage from Cao Cao's commentary:

Attack complete emptiness with complete fullness.
I note that this is a comment on the portion of the Art of War that brings up the metaphor of a stone being dashed against an egg as an illustration of what it means to effectively channel troop energy (so basically Cao Cao is saying, a powerful maneuver that dashes a rock against an egg means attacking the gaps of the enemy in full force and the surgical strikes by Zhang Liao and the other troops are doing just that)

for their part, Cao Cao's forces also refer to portions of the commentary

Zhang Liao brings up this tidbit as he withdraws to lure Yuan army troops into a trap:

Opponents are moved by the prospect of an advantage.
this comments on the portion of the Art of War that talks about sacrificial baits for enemies to take (amusingly enough, the lesson is similar to what Laozi said about first giving what is to be taken, though the emphasis there is more about polarity shifts rather than deceptive methods)

some other troops invoke this passage:

Direct confrontation is facing opponents head on, surprise forces attack unexpectedly from the sides.
this is quite a simplistic comment (for practical use) on the passage about confronting directly and winning by surprise (and the illustration in Ravages is rather literal, with Cao troops stabbing on the side the Yuan cavalry engaged in an encirclement maneuver)

some portions of the commentary are not translated professionally (by the source I'm using), so I'll just quote merc's translation

utilize the energy of a fighting force
this seems to be Cao Cao's comment on the title of chapter 5 of the Art of War, perhaps his way of summarizing what the lessons on troop energy or momentum are all about

make well-timed attacks
this comments on the portion of the Art of War that likens momentum to a raging torrent that can carry boulders, and characterizes precision in terms of a raptor swooping down on its prey (note that at the time of its utterance in the chapter, Zhang Liao is ordering the Cao cavalry to strike against the Yuan cavalry disoriented by the surprise flank attack which incidentally makes the flank attack the 'direct' correlate to the 'indirect' surprise of the cavalry charge after playing the 'indirect' role to the 'direct' defensive posture)

promptness means close range
this comments on the portion of the Art of War that talks about instantaneous timing (and its application in the chapter seems to be rather literal as well, with the deceptive shield formation hemming in the Yuan cavalry so that the archers inside can launch a surprise hit at close range)

use the natural and inherent power
this comments on the portion of the Art of War that talks about the nature of things (for instance, rocks and logs) and how energy is unleashed given the appropriate configurations (rounded rocks and logs on steep ground)... it's not clear how this applies in the chapter, though perhaps the comment alludes to the passage which aptly describes the momentum of the Cao army as it manages to thwart the Yuan army

after all this, perhaps readers might still be feeling confused (it doesn't help after all that the chapter lacks diagrams and depicts things in a rather hazy fashion), so I'll try once more to differentiate what Yuan Fang did in round 1 from what Cao Cao did in round 2 (and also, how Cao Cao's methods try to counter Yuan Fang's methods)

recall that in 322 and 323 Yuan Fang placed a premium on securing advantageous grounds and expanding the room for maneuvers and movements (that is to say, the main factor is the use of space and how this configures troop momentum)

meanwhile, in 342 and 345 Cao Cao stressed the use of targeted feints and attacks, dangling baits (thus generating illusory grounds of advantage) to distract enemy troops and lure them into dead ends that cancel mobility and force situations of deadly standoffs (that is to say, the main factor is the use of troop momentum to manipulate space)

ultimately, Cao Cao is able to pull this off because unlike Guo Jia, he can fight in battle and command troops in the frontlines

note that without the room for expansion and enhanced maneuverability, there is no room to shrink into for repositioning (and thus one is forced to tread on deadly ground and fight to the death, cancelling Yuan Fang's advice)

345 also includes a quote from Cao Cao's commentary, this time on chapter 6 of the Art of War of Sunzi

Hit where they are not expecting it.
the portion being commented on deals with surprise maneuvers out of nowhere, building upon the use of deception and surprise to effectively unleash one's troop momentum on the startled enemy (as discussed in chapter 5)

the nagging question on my mind though is: how was Xu Chu able to join the night raid in the first place?

or perhaps: could a redhare carry Xu Chu while still maintaining its speed?

of course Ravages maintains its gimmicky portions, haha

(but it must be emphasized that they are sideshows or enhancements to the scheming game)

once again we never get to see the Feng Hou formation in its full glory (we're only told that the formation has launched and that the Cao army is struggling against it implying a time skip of a few hours or so especially since it looks like it's daytime already)

then again in Ravages the formation visuals are not as important as the principles conveyed

also interesting to note that Yuan Fang was able to sneak in 'sting operatives' with the mission of taking out Cao Cao in the middle of battle (a reminder that Ravages battle situations feature sneaky schemes too, and that the masterminds don't care about winning the showdowns in an honorable manner)

I think Yuan Fang's numerical advantage early on helped secure this win (Cao Cao was also prepared enough to have bring body doubles other than Zhang Liao, thus foiling the sting operation)

and then the big twist is revealed, one that reverses the trajectory of the campaign in Cao Cao's favor...

first we're told that the campaign is a long con to allow Yuan Fang to complete his internal takeover of the clan

now we're told that the epic battle is a fancy charade to allow Cao Cao's insider to burn the real rations depot at Yangwu, haha

the 'farce' continues, with the primacy of schemes over battles reaffirmed for the nth time

let's recall the setup so far

Cao Cao planned to use the supply lines to his base (as well as routes to the heartland) as bait for the Yuan army to advance further and overextend, giving him the opportunity to attack the rations depot

Yuan Fang planned to use disinfo about the rations depot as bait for Cao Cao to conduct his raid and fall into the fire trap, allowing the rest of the army to proceed as planned and push further into the supply lines and the heartland

but lo and behold, it turns out Cao Cao used himself as bait to distract Yuan Fang (and Zhang He and Gao Lan) long enough for the insider to finish the deed... too bad Yang wasn't able to guard Yangwu properly

the first portion of 347 features an illuminating flashback (the things Yuan Shao dreams of while he's being rescued)

this shows that Yuan Shao and Zuo Ci have been partners in crime for quite some time, and that both wish to put an end to Han

to be fair, while they are both ambitious in their own way (Yuan Shao wants his clan to rule the world, Zuo Ci wants to usher in a new heavenly order with his sect as the dominant players) they are merely responding to (and taking advantage of) a regime that has long become dysfunctional (on that note, I recommend the book Fire Over Luoyang for a good overview of the Later Han and how it declined)

perhaps they see the groups they represent as the ones capable of pacifying the unrest and restoring stability (once they succeed in seizing control after stirring and exacerbating

existing unrest), so their motives are not purely self-serving (even if they end up construing the notion of 'saving the country' on their own partisan terms)

Using his own brother as a lab rat

so while Yuan Shao and Zuo Ci want to collude, their backgrounds prevent them from openly joining forces

That guy (Yuan Shao) just does not care about "given" families, as I see. He had a loved one, so cherished Yuan Fang

Just how Yuan Fang despises political marriages

I'll get to the part about Yuan Fang in a bit, but first I'd like to note Zuo Ci's mention of Liu Xiu (the first emperor of Later Han)

the reason the Han is divided into two periods is that sometime in between, someone managed to seize control and declare a new dynasty, the Xin

long story short the project did not last, uprisings broke out, and eventually the Liu clan managed to take back control (and suppressed rival rebel groups along the way)(edited)*[19:02]***amusingly enough, both Yuan Shao and Yuan Shu are trying to learn from Liu Xiu, but whereas Yuan Shu wanted to superficially replicate the path to legitimacy by means of securing the imperial seal (Jia Xu says in 140 that Liu Xiu used this trick, but that in the current age it won't work), Yuan Shao understood that loyalty discourse (as vested in the Liu clan) is the more effective virtual seal of approval (and that the previous peasant rebellions showed that this seal remains firmly in place notwithstanding institutional decay)**

as an alternative, Zuo Ci proposes a sneaky scheme (an alternative take on the notion of 'continuation') whereby he offers to groom one of Yuan Shao's bastards into a future hegemon that will swallow the Yuan clan and ultimately take over the world (sometimes I wonder if Zuo Ci may have advised Yuan Shao to have Kong Cha killed, the same young woman whose adult name he suggests for the dad to give)

such an arrangement will allow Yuan Shao to still play the part of a loyalist maintaining the ancestral traditions (and this partially protects the reputation of the clan by having the secret bastard do the dirty work), while taking pride in the fact that the new hegemon descends from him... talk about having one's cake and eating it too, haha

thus in a way Zuo Ci (whose courtesy name is Yuanfang) can be seen as the second father to Yuan Fang (who inherits the crane motif from his shadow mentor) even as Yuan Shao officially poses as an 'uncle'

too bad we never get to see Yuan Fang's mom on-panel

I should note, even though the Yuan army suffered a major loss due to the burning of the rations at Yangwu, Yuan Fang's ultimate plan for the clan could still have succeeded, were it not for the meddling of Jiang Yiqu... which goes to show that more schemes are in play that would lead to the slow-motion collapse of the Yuan clan

Sima Yi may have been operating as a red herring during the campaign (so that the main insider can work unimpeded), but that doesn't mean he can't pull off tricks of his own

(probably, given his extensive business networks, he could have pressured or persuaded some merchants in Hebei to work with the Sima clan so that they'll be safe when Cao Cao wins)

it's also mentioned that Jiang Yiqu belongs to an 'opposition' faction (it's not clear if he sided with Yuan Tan or Yuan Shang or the Tian clan), and since he has been deliberately sidelined in the mobilizations, some secret message may have swayed him to come to rescue Yuan Shao, Yuan Tan, and Yuan Shang (inadvertently ruining Yuan Fang's secret plans)

the other trick Sima Yi pulls off is framing Zhang He and Gao Lan as the insiders (since their presence at Yuan Fang's side meant that they couldn't prevent the fire at Yangwu), and having Duan Jian escape so that he can spread the accusations back in Hebei (this is meant to pressure the two to defect to the Cao camp instead)

this also means that even if Yuan Fang were to successfully retreat and reconsolidate his forces in the north, the clan would lose two valuable commanders (and he'd lose two retainers who are loyal to him)

it must be highlighted that even in the event of a disastrous defeat, Yuan Fang has backup plans (and given that the Yuan army still has the overwhelming advantage in troops and resources, he could still lead a strong army against Cao Cao next time had the fire trap in Wuchao eliminated his internal obstacles)

the glaring gap in Yuan Fang's setup though is that for all that meticulous and long-term planning, he doesn't have anyone to succeed his plans

a fitting ironic note I suppose, considering that he was groomed as a bastard to devour the Yuan clan (so too would he not be able to pass on his legacy)

That battle matched Fang's desires and what his father did to his lover.

He was talking about how big ambitions are useless distractions (similarly to how scholars seek for the meaning in life, when thats hardly relevant in ones life) and lost everything in a

battle, that was supposed to be merely a facade for something greater. He lost everything (great ambition) in this "little" (as his life was supposed to be) battle. And he lost because of backstabbing, exactly how Shao ended Fang's desired life/lover.

Well, if you asked Shao, Fang's love was a facade, just like this battle, haha

I'll get more to that when I cover 351

suffice it to say that Yuan Fang's lack of foresight with regard to what happens after he succeeds in his vengeance may very well be the whole point... perhaps deep down he doesn't really care about world conquest as the new son of heaven, maybe after he wins he'll simply walk away and tend to his garden (and mourn his losses)

well, that's exactly how scholars do not exactly know the meaning of life

this allows us to see his remarks in 192 in another light

Fate is unpredictable. Anyone would die if Heaven demands it; and Heaven sparing one's life definitely has its meaning. Who says a wicked man now... won't become a kind ruler later? his motivation was revenge, so after the conquest, he does not really have any motivation, so ...

to recap the broader campaign developments

the showdown in Gushi was a charade in response to the long con that led to the fire trap in Wuchao

Cao Cao accomplishes his strategic goal thanks to the insider Yang burning the Yuan army rations at Yangwu

Xun Yu thwarts the opportunists and insiders in the Xu capital and averts internal collapse and defection (in addition, Liu Xie agrees to give Cao Cao a chance)

the main assault in Cao Cao's frontline bases plus the advance deep into Cao Cao's turf are still ongoing, although with the rations gone, emergency withdrawal from the overextended front will be difficult (and once news or rumors about the fire in Yangwu circulate, morale will plummet)

Yuan Fang orders a withdrawal and prepares to regroup in the north but is backstabbed by Yang

note how this portion hints at Han Hao's infiltration tactic revealed later in the chapter

the amusing thing is, given the fog of war, it's reasonable for these officers to think that reports about the fire in Yangwu could be some sort of psy-op to disturb morale (this sort of

reasoning in turn explains why coverups and information blackouts like what Guo Yuan does in the next chapter happen, as part of morale management)

and a reminder that tunnels go both ways, and that the tunnels that Yue Yi used in the assault on Cao Cao's main camp can in turn be used by Xiahou Dun for his counterattack

it's important to highlight though that these retaliatory tactics by the Cao army (Han Hao's infiltrators, Xiahou Dun's tunnel strikers) by themselves would not be able to overcome and repel the Yuan army onslaught without the critical fire at Yangwu... conversely, the destruction of the rations would force the Yuan army to withdraw, but it's the coordinated follow-up counterattacks that inflict massive damage on a demoralized force in retreat

the lesson is, mass casualties in Ravages result more from combinations of schemes (which may feature lopsided engagements here and there) than from decisive head-on battles

Guo Yuan was on a winning streak and seemed poised to capture the areas surrounding the Xu capital, until the fire at Yangwu reversed the situation (instead of paving the way for the internal collapse of Cao Cao's territory, now it's the Yuan army that has to worry about surviving the ambushes and returning home safely)

he's fortunate to have received the news early enough, since a worse scenario would have been that the troops get stuck in some sort of stalemate, rations begin to run low, and the supplies have yet to arrive without explanation

and since Guo Yuan's deputy found the alibi to be sketchy, I wonder if there are other officers and soldiers who have silently noticed too amid the cheers (what if they all get it, but are acting like they believe it so that they are able to stabilize their own morale, haha)

after all, since the Yuan army has enough troops to open a new front, if the other front has resulted in total victory, why would there be a need to recall troops from one front to 'mop up' the survivors in another...

Jia Xu once again using harassment tactics that can be basically considered to be trolling on a military level

meanwhile, as the campaign rages on, Sima Yi sneakily profits from the outcome by consolidating his business conglomerate (once again reminding us that in Ravages, battles form just one part of the broader scheming game and power struggle)

recall that in the campaign, various merchant groups working under/with the warlords have been pressured or persuaded to make use of their amassed wealth and properties to fund or support the war machinery (for instance, via rations procurements and deliveries)

I suppose what Sima Yi did was coordinate the allocation of burdens to protect other clans from financial collapse, as well as offer guaranteed bailouts and perks (in exchange for the beneficiaries joining the cartel)

I note that Yuan Fang has remained a romantic at heart (however embittered he may have been as a result of Yuan Shao's machinations) and that his 'modern' outlook is tied closely to his romanticism

he could have agreed to the arranged marriage with Sun Shu while still keeping Kong Cha as a secondary wife or a concubine (a common arrangement at the time), but he says no to all that

he could have joined the power struggle and 'make something of himself' at an early age and posed as a flower-watcher to hide his ambitions (something Yuan Shao wished were the case), but he says no to all that

he grew up in a privileged background and was able to learn many sorts of things (from the art of war to the musings of the sages), but at the end of the day he just wants to be left alone and tend to his garden and be with his loved one

note the context in which Yuan Fang brings up the matter of 'emptiness' or 'nothingness' [虛無] (in a similar vein, one can also talk about being or absolute reality and other such grand speculative notions)

irst as an aside I'd like to mention that the phrase is used in certain ancient texts, and one notable instance is from a passage in the Zhuangzi:

It is said that peacefulness, solitude, emptiness, and wu wei are the foundation of heaven and earth and the supremacy of virtue, upon which sainted men rest their minds.
(this shows that the notion is of some concern to various thinkers especially the taoists, who for all their complex paradoxical formulations designed to stimulate thinking outside the box, are at the root of it concerned with living simply in accordance with the tao, without rigid impositions)

now, Yuan Fang appears to be mocking the speculative efforts of the sages (I suppose as an expression of youthful arrogance and confidence in his ways), but he mainly brings them up in response to Yuan Shao asking the meaning of Yuan Fang's life (in this case, he's not really seeking theoretical clarification about the significance and value of human life, but it's more like he's prodding Yuan Fang to seek 'greater' but still worldly things to make his life 'mean something')

basically Yuan Fang rejects the idea that for his life to be meaningful he has to play absurd games in pursuit of some big ambition (couched in terms of some high-minded ideal or grand narrative), and so in spirit he is channeling the lessons of some of those sages he just mocked

Yuan Shao's retort of course is that Yuan Fang can't just extricate himself from the circumstances he is in just because he wants to (have nothing to do with them)

after all, unlike the sages, Yuan Fang has not really renounced all the worldly games, he's chilling in a private courtyard rather than abandoning the clan and cultivating as a hermit in some mountain elsewhere

and since Yuan Shao has big plans for his bastard son he would do what he can to turn Yuan Fang to the dark side...

ultimately, both Fang and Guo Jia represent the things that each other's ideologies despised. Guo Jia was the one who cared little about himself (considering that Zhuge Liang so easily managed to get rid of him), in contrast to his love to country - similar to scholars who were researching the meaning of life.

at the end of the day, both of them, technically, achieved whatever their goals were (Yuan clan collapsed, after all. Even if Fang did not see it), even if it was for nothing (as Cao Cao failed later on and Fang could not revive her love and could not "come back after a drop like this" into the darkness. At least, both of them died content - Fang died in his own little well, all alone, while Guo Jia died surrounded by people who wanted good for the country

Guo Jia is one of the more selfless (and ideologically driven) of the Eight, after all

the eighth might be closer in disposition to Yuan Fang, though perhaps the more hard-boiled of the two

the Eighth cares more about individuals (as they make the country after all), rather than country IN GENERAL. And here comes another contradiction - he personally does not care about any individual, haha. (I will analyze his character later)

the image of the well also figures in how Yuan Fang died, how while close to reaching the stars he was pulled back into the well (with the cliff as the visual cue)

now I turn my attention to the reference to king Zhou, the last ruler of Shang

traditionally his downfall is due to how he neglected to govern justly and indulged in capricious pleasures with his consort Daji (basically a typical example of how a bad ruler can lose the mandate of heaven to someone else with greater virtue)

by comparing Yuan Fang's carefree lifestyle to that of the bad king, Yuan Shao is insinuating that Yuan Fang should make better use of his life by joining the power struggle (in this, Yuan Shao given his ambition to take over implicitly compares his clan to that of the house that would go on to found the Zhou, the regime that succeeded the Shang and that he sees himself

as the duke that started the rebellion and wishes for Yuan Fang to be the king of the new regime)

Yuan Fang's stunning retort (and in keeping with the Ravages approach to traditional historical accounts) is that who knows what king Zhou may have felt as he gazed at the star-picking tower (can we really say that his downfall was simply the result of mismanagement, did he really do the dirty deeds attributed to him, etc.)

looking at the sky from the bottom of a well
(a chengyu)

Look at stars from inside a well, only a few stars will be visible.
(a passage from the Shizi) throughout the chapter the image of a well figures in contrasting ways

on the one hand, the well signifies epistemological blinders, constrained vantage-points that can be remedied if one opens one's mind to other possibilities (this is the sunny-side lesson of leaving one's garden of delights to explore the wider world)

on the other hand, the well can also represent the crowded world under heaven, where multiple ambitions and petty interests clash and collide with no safe place for one to cultivate in peace (this is the dark-side lesson of abandoning foreclosed paths beyond one's reach and just getting down into the dirty business of playing the power games)

perhaps Yuan Fang's deathbed thought (about there being an indefinite series of wells within/around wells) is an attempt to bring together the two visions... yes, there is room to expand one's vision, but along the way there are constraints to deal with and struggles to overcome (that is to say, one never gets to behold and enjoy the entirety of absolute reality so in a sense there is a degree of incompleteness to what the sages have been doing, but one is nonetheless already entangled in the real and its various layers)

in a way I am also reminded of Plato's allegory of the cave, but instead of there being a cave (the realm of illusions) and a single outside world (the realm of ideas) there is instead a series of nested caves...

at any rate, Yuan Fang's vision allows us to think of various possibilities of interaction within the interface (perhaps forces in an upper well layer push certain people down a few notches, maybe some descend into a certain comfortable niche and stay there, etc.)

in another note, Ravages should take more time to indulge in speculative visions alongside the usual social commentary and moral reflection and scheming

Yuan Fang as he dies reveals in poetic fashion what he wanted all his life... a safe corner to live freely in quietude, accompanied by his beloved

in his dying breath he repudiates the verse about the crane that Yuan Shao (and Zuo Ci) would invoke when talking about Yuan Fang's promising career:

The crane cries out in deepest marsh, / its voice is heard in the skies.
the black text (not included in the scanlation) neatly provides an alternative and gentler image of the crane:

The lone crane loves the solitude. It flew here and remained.
that particular poem from the Classic of Poetry is basically about ambition and rising above others and being recognized (the line that Zhang Liao quoted in 320 about stones polishing gems is from that same poem as well)

https://ctext.org/book-of-poetry/he-ming

to briefly revisit the point about king Zhou

the last king of Shang is blamed for putting a woman over governance, but Yuan Shao's act of having Kong Cha killed, rather than saving the realm, instead unleashed a more ferocious demon...

meanwhile, just because Yuan Fang is dead doesn't mean the schemes stop

as part of the contingency plan if ever the Yuan army loses in the Guandu campaign (and somehow the main targets manage to survive), opposition factions will not only be framed for the blunder, but their retreat will be sabotaged

it's also important to reiterate that killing Yuan Fang was not part of Guo Jia's plan (that was Yang Xiu's own initiative, since he has schemes of his own as well)

though I wonder, how would Guo Jia and Cao Cao have wanted to resolve things in the long run if Yang Xiu didn't carry out the deed

the plan was to bog Yuan Fang down with internal revolts throughout Hebei (and perhaps Guo Jia might even ask for the aid of Gongsun Kang)

this also highlights that Zhang He and Gao Lan are opportunistic social climbers (who also happen to be skilled commanders and decent schemers), something hinted as early as 248 when Gao Lan flattered Yuan Fang

sure, Sima Yi may have framed them, but given their high positions Yuan Fang might have disbelieved the accusations (had he survived)

it's regrettable that Ravages didn't flesh out the anti-war faction in the Yuan clan led by Tian Feng, though his brief appearance at least shows him to be good at noticing people

meanwhile, we get to see a glimpse of what Sima Hui thinks about his students fighting one another as they serve rival warlords who may not be interested in revitalizing imperial Han

and given that when Yuan Fang made his debut he has already graduated from the School of Water Mirror, we have yet to see how the first of the Eight Geniuses interacted with his master (similarly, we also haven't really seen scenes of Zuo Ci mentoring Yuan Fang)

come to think of it, perhaps Yuan Fang didn't even live with the others as often, since he's from a privileged clan and could do as he wishes (with Yuan Shao's blessing)

anti-war themes are centered around Zhuge Liang, so I guess that is the reason

but Zhuge Liang articulated a more principled stance, I think Tian Feng opposed specifically the war with Cao Cao for pragmatic reasons (he may very well have been onboard with the campaign against Gongsun Zan)

there is a hint in chapter 17 though that Tian Feng also didn't like the campaign against Dong Zhuo, perhaps since it further destabilizes the realm...

now, unpacking Yang Xiu's goals is a tricky matter... one could say his methodical undermining of the Yuan clan is a matter of clan vendetta (though it's not clear if the loyalist Yang Biao would have approved of such dirty methods for family benefit)

now as for his grand plan to do something similar to the Cao clan, on the one hand he's saying it's for the sake of his dad (3 chapters later he also appeals to the duty of loyalists based on what his dad said), but on the other hand he also agreed that it's hard to pull back from addiction to power (so I sometimes wonder if he's also doing it to boost his standing)

if only we'll ever get to see Yang Biao on-panel...

meanwhile, on the military front, while the Yuan army is in constant retreat, Yuan Fang prepares a poisoned trap in the form of secret correspondence letters implicating many in the Cao camp (some of whom are merely framed up to sow chaos)

Cao Cao, not wanting to miss a chance to troll Xiahou Dun, does his trick, haha

setting aside the technical question of how Yuan Fang's corpse was secretly retrieved and preserved (given that what we see of the face didn't seem to be rotting), it's nice to note that Yuan Fang's three classmates dared to hold this private ceremony (even if certain others

whom they invited perhaps minor alumni of the School of Water Mirror who happen to be serving under Cao Cao as well declined to join)

One flame burned away a crisis. But how much brotherhood was destroyed by a fire?
and their collective response is:

One flame... will also burn away the enmity.
though just as imperial Han continues to decline, so too would Sima Hui's star apprentices (who were supposed to serve Han) slowly dwindle as they suffer the ravages of time...

the black text for the chapter goes as follows

“pa pa pa…” The crane flapped its wings and flew away.
interesting how the two sendoffs managed to use two contrasting figurative terms for death... on the one hand, resting (in 351), and on the other hand, departing (in 354)

Yuan Fang was at peace with himself when he died alone, and during his funeral that's when his former peers acknowledged his flight and belatedly sent him off on a friendly note

this is the final nail on Fang's grave, by Guo Jia

Both of them had plans post-death, but whos the only one of these two in the history records?

Ravages tends to feature the thoughts of commoners every now and then, but this episode is one of the longer scenes, taking up around 1/4 or 1/3 of the chapter

we can see that even bystanders (and victims) of the conflict can contribute fair insights and observations in their own right, even if they are disempowered

I'll discuss the ploy in a bit, but at any rate the commoners have their own limited agency too as they discuss current affairs and plan for the future

even the corpse of Fang can't rest. Still dragged in schemes.

considering that the setting of the chapter is in Jingzhou (way to the south of where the action is), looks like reports and rumors have spread quickly, allowing commoners in restaurants to talk intelligently about what happens to them next

Zhuge Liang's whispers and correspondences with Liaoyuan Huo (who has agents of his own to track down the seventh and receive tips) highlight the importance of intelligence networks in the overall conflict

this also sheds light on how Zhuge Liang has been trying to rig the playing field behind the scenes for years just by conveying the right tidbits to the right people in the right place at the right time (and of course later chapters would reveal that he has also been busy spinning the heroic tales of Liu Bei even before Liu Bei was ready, haha)

unlike the usual spy thrillers though (which are for the most part heroic adventures focusing on sneaky wily characters that show off their tradecraft), Ravages stresses how mundane and pervasive spies and informants are... they're creeping and crawling all over the realm

in an ironic reinterpretation of Zhuge Liang's names ('liang' and 'ming' are associated with brightness and light, while 'crouching dragon' signifies a talent waiting for the right moment in the spotlight) we get to see that while his reputation shines brightly (that is to say, at this point many people in positions of power know he's the most famous of the eight) he does his schemes in the shadows while pretending to be a recluse... like the oxymoronic formulation of the shadowy illuminati

we can say Zhuge Liang operates in a manner similar to Sima Yi (who are said to be able to think within a similar wavelength), but instead of shady business deals and gangster moves, it's more like he's building his own deep state apparatus and cultivating various point persons

in this case, Zhuge Liang doesn't offer much, but the info Liaoyuan Huo receives would be enough to encourage Liu Bei to make his next move and finally make contact with Liu Biao (at a time when Cao Cao would be preoccupied with the weakened Yuan clan in the north)

the interaction between Liaoyuan Huo and Zhuge Liang at this point can seem rather... awkward

Zhuge Liang knows about Liaoyuan Huo's background as a former assassin of the Sima clan, Liaoyuan Huo knows that Zhuge Liang is deeply rooting for Liu Bei, but they keep playing this charade, haha

Zhuge Liang playing the tsundere game, Liaoyuan Huo playing the stalker (if not yandere) game

and remember that it would take 8 years before Zhuge Liang formally joins Liu Bei, haha

which means they've been at it with these correspondences behind the scenes for quite a while

interestingly, with Zhuge Liang having a number of hideouts, this is also an indirect invitation to have Liaoyuan Huo station minions in the right places, ready to collaborate with Zhuge Liang's own minions at any time...

I suppose this is an indirect indicator that Sima Yi still took care of (or took control over) Tian De and the remnants of the Tian clan after Tian Feng was poisoned

meanwhile, I wonder how Yang Xiu got close to Yuan Shang while Yuan Fang's other collaborator Duan Jian was still alive... the interactions must have been really awkward at the start (or perhaps Yang Xiu was able to dupe Duan Jian into thinking this is still part of Yuan Fang's plan)

it's questionable to what extent Yang Xiu is a Han loyalist, it seems he just wants to avenge his clan (and maybe rise to power)

on that note, at this point even Sima Yi's long-term plan strays from his earlier musings (in that the takeover scheme is preferably done out of opportunism and profiteering, rather than fueled by vengeance)

Sun Jian was the loyalist who preferred to stay in the frontier

Ma Teng was the loyalist who also had a base in the frontier, but would rather serve in court if given the chance

Liu Chong was the loyalist (assuming he is) who preferred to maintain his own fiefdom and govern it well as an example

Yang Biao (and to some extent Wang Yun and Dong Cheng) was the loyalist in court who would work with a tyrant and usurper to protect the throne, while plotting to restore order at some point

the way he finished off Yuan Shao was particularly mean and vindictive

(it's almost as if we get a glimpse of what Sima Yi would like to do in the distant future)

And Yuan Shao died, while still taking care of Yuan Fang's "world"...

and I'd like to note that Ravages basically rendered off-panel another big clash with the Yuan clan over at Cangting

what the floating recap text (along with the conversations between Sima Yi and Jia Kui's dad) would tell us is that the Yuan brothers refused to cooperate, and thus paved the way for rout after rout even though the Yuan army still outnumbered the Cao army

and of course with regard to the infighting, Yuan Fang still had some agents that delayed the reconsolidation of the factions of Yuan Tan and Yuan Shang

Yuan Shao would have just wasted away tending Yuan Fang's garden... strictly speaking, Yang Xiu didn't have to do what he did

he gets to stab Yuan Fang, poison Tian Feng, drive Yuan Shao to the deep end... his boss kill count is perhaps the highest in the arc, haha

alright, now I want to hear more feedback about the overall discussion thus far

if one didn't pay much attention while reading the arc, one might just get the impression of hazy battles, much grandstanding with smug faces and poses, a strange detour to gangster land that takes people away from the excitement of battle and conveniently inserts a central figure into the story, plot twist after plot twist that rendered the battles insignificant, and an unforeseen backstab to conveniently take out the dominant player...

and this is why it's important to pay close attention to the various aspects of the chapters when reading Ravages