

Experts hope DNA can unlock Chinese warlord's secrets

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Scientists said Tuesday they hope to collect DNA from hundreds of men surnamed Cao so they can prove a recently excavated tomb in central China belongs to the legendary warlord Cao Cao.

Historians told a briefing that modern science may be the key to unlocking a nearly 1,800-year-old mystery of what happened to the clever yet cruel tyrant, who is one of Chinese history's most enduring and colourful characters.

"We are currently collecting DNA samples of Cao Cao's descendants across the country," Li Hui, an associate professor of anthropology at Shanghai's Fudan University, told reporters.

A multidisciplinary university team is hoping they can match the DNA of living Chinese to remains found last month at a tomb in central Henan province.

The tomb is located near the [Yellow River](#) and the city of Anyang, where Cao Cao ruled the Kingdom of Wei from 208 until 220, when he died aged 65.

"If we can conduct a DNA test on the unearthed skull and it matches the DNA of Cao's descendants that we collected and studied, we can determine that the tomb belongs to Cao," Li said.

Scientists will need hundreds of samples before they start looking at the

[genetic code](#) in the [Y chromosome](#), which is passed from father to son, to establish paternal ancestry, Li said.

The team is also seeking DNA samples from men surnamed Xiahou, as Cao Cao's father was believed to have been adopted from a family with that name.

The discovery of the tomb has been surrounded by controversy and many scholars have questioned the authenticity of the relics.

Cao himself may have conspired against them. Han Sheng, a historian at the university, said according to one story, Cao created 72 decoy [tombs](#) to prevent people from discovering his final resting place.

"The unverified myths about Cao Cao are many, which casts doubts over the authenticity of the tomb," Han said.

Cao's exploits were immortalised in the 14th century historical novel "Romance of the Three Kingdoms", regarded as one of China's greatest literary works.

Cao remains a mainstay in Chinese culture and appears often in works ranging from Peking opera to video games. He most recently stepped into the spotlight as the villain in John Woo's blockbuster "Red Cliff".

Cao's reputation, however, may make people reluctant to offer their DNA.

Cao Mingxu, a 22-year-old student at the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Trade, told the Shanghai Daily he thought the project was "ridiculous".

"Are the researchers suggesting that I am actually one of the descendants of Cao Cao, simply because my surname happens to be Cao?" he said.

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