

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 14.

So I'm back after taking the last couple weeks off to do some charity work and some traveling. I am eager to dive back into the story, and I hope you are too.

Last time, we left off with Cao Cao getting all "You killed my father. Prepare to die." Except in this case it was more like, "The guy you sent to protect my father killed my father. Prepare to die." Either way, Cao Cao was getting ready to lay siege to Xu Province and kill everyone there to avenge his father's death. The imperial protector of Xu Province, Tao (2) Qian (1), sent out two messengers to seek help from outside sources. One of these messengers, an official named Mi (2) Zhu (2), went to Beihai (2,3) Prefecture to see the governor there, Kong (3) Rong (2).

Now this Kong Rong is a relatively minor character in our story, but in real life, he was considered one of the leading scholars of his time. He was a 20th-generation descendant of Kong Zi, or better known to the west as Confucius. So he's certainly got the pedigree. And he was supposedly something of a wunderkind, and there are a number of stories of how smart he was as a child.

For instance, when he was 10, he went to see Li (3) Ying (1), the governor of Henan Prefecture. The guard at the gate wasn't about to let this random child in to the governor's residence. But Kong Rong told him, "My family has been connected with the governor's family for generations." So the guard relented and let him in. When Li (3) Ying (1) heard how he got in, he asked Kong (3) Rong (2), "What relationship is there between our houses?" Kong Rong answered, "Well, Confucius once consulted with Lao Zi, so doesn't that mean our families have been connected for ages?"

So I'm going to have to do an aside from an aside here and explain what this answer means. Lao Zi, for those of you who don't know, was the founder of Taoism, and his supposed real name was Li (3) Er (2). So because Li (3) Ying (1) shared this last name, Kong Rong is implying that he is a descendant of Lao Zi. After all, as a popular Chinese saying about people with the same last name goes, "We were all family

500 years ago.” And as for the connection between the house of Confucius and the house of Lao Zi, they were contemporaries, and it is said that Confucius had once consulted Lao Zi about the rites. So Kong Rong is basically playing off of that story to claim a connection with Li (3) Ying (1).

So apparently it was rather amazing that a 10-year-old would know of such things, because Li (3) Ying (1) was stunned by this answer. A little bit later, when one of his advisers came by, Li (3) Ying (1) pointed at the child and said, “He is a wunderkind.” But this adviser was the skeptical sort and replied, “People who were smart as kids don’t always grow up to be smart adults.” Kong Rong, however, immediately retorted, “If that’s the case, then you, sir, must have been a brilliant child.”

After everybody went “oohh” at that sick burn, they all declared that Kong Rong was going to do great things when he grew up. When he did grow up, he rose to be the governor of Beihai (2,3), and he gained a reputation as a great host. He had once said, “My wish is to see my house always full of guests and my cup never empty.” But aside from throwing great parties, he also was a good enough governor to earn the love of the people.

Alright, after all that background, let’s jump back to where we were in our story. So Mi (2) Zhu (2) arrived at Beihai with a message begging Kong Rong to go save Xu Province from Cao Cao’s bloodlust. Kong Rong, however, hemmed and hawed a little bit upon receiving this request.

“I am a good friend of Tao Qian’s,” he told Mi Zhu, “and you have come here in person, so how can I refuse? But there is no bad blood between Cao Cao and me, so I should first send a message to him to try to convince him to make peace. If he refuses, then I will mobilize my army.”

“But Cao Cao is supremely confident of the strength of his forces. He would never agree to a truce,” Mi Zhu said.

But still, Kong Rong insisted on doing things “the proper way.” I guess you won’t anything less from a descendant of Confucius. So he dispatched a messenger while ordering his army to get ready. Just then, however, an urgent report arrived. A yellow turban rebel chieftain named Guan (3) Hai (4) was marching

on Kong Rong's prefecture at the head of a force of tens of thousands. Kong Rong immediately gathered up his army and went out to meet the rebels.

When the two sides had lined up, Guan (3) Hai (4) rode out and said, "I know that your prefecture has ample grain. I would like to borrow 10,000 loads. Give me the grain, and my forces will retreat. If not, then we'll sack your city and raze it to the ground."

Kong Rong was not going to comply that easily.

"I am an official of the house of Han," he said. "I am defending the territory of the Han. I have no grain here for rebels."

Guan (3) Hai (4) was not pleased with this answer, so he wielded his blade and galloped toward Kong Rong. One of Kong Rong's officers rode out to meet him, but was cut down after just a few bouts. Kong Rong's forces fell into disarray and ran back into the city. Guan (3) Hai (4) then ordered his men to surround the city. So now Kong Rong had enough trouble with his own siege without worrying about someone else's siege. This made both Kong Rong and Mi Zhu restless.

The next day, Kong Rong went to the top of the city walls to survey the situation outside, and the sight of immense rebel army did not do anything to alleviate his worries. But suddenly, he saw a single rider galloping into the rebel's formation with a spear in hand. This man rode to and fro as if no one was there, and he was able to get all the way to the foot of the city wall. There, he looked up and shouted for the guards to open the gate for him.

Well, Kong Rong didn't recognize this guy, so obviously he wasn't going to open the door that easily. In the meantime, the rebels had regrouped and caught up to this lone rider. But no matter. He turned around and quickly mowed down about a dozen or so rebels, and that was enough to convince the rest to fall back. Upon seeing this, Kong Rong ordered his men to open the gates and let the rider in.

Once inside, the warrior dismounted, laid his spear on the ground, ran up to the city wall, and bowed to Kong Rong. When asked for his name, he answered, "My name is Taishi (4,3) Ci (2). You have

bestowed great generosity upon my mother. I returned home from Liaodong (2,1) for a visit yesterday and learned that rebels were besieging your city. My mother said that I should come lend a hand to repay your kindness toward her, so I've come alone."

So the deal here was that even though Kong Rong and Taishi (4,3) Ci (2) had never met, the former knew the latter's reputation as a man of valor. Taishi (4,3) Ci (2) was working far away from home, leaving his mother alone in their house outside the city. Kong Rong often sent grain and clothes to Taishi Ci's mom, hence her feeling of gratitude toward the governor.

After Kong Rong thanked Taishi Ci by giving him a suit of armor and a horse, Taishi Ci volunteered to lead 1,000 men to go out and take on the rebels, who numbered in the tens of thousands.

"Sir, even though you're a great warrior, right now the rebels have momentum on their side. We must tread carefully," Kong Rong said.

But Taishi Ci was insistent on going back into the fray.

"My mother sent me here to repay your great kindness," he said. "If I cannot help lift this siege, then I would be too ashamed to go face her. I would rather fight to the death."

Kong Rong now offered an alternative.

"I've heard that Liu Bei is a hero of the times. If we can get him to come help us, this siege will certainly be lifted. It's just too bad that I have no one who's up to the task."

"Governor, if you would write a letter, I will deliver it at once," Taishi Ci said.

Kong Rong immediately wrote the letter and gave it to Taishi Ci. Taishi Ci ate a full meal, donned his armor, hopped on his horse, hanged his bow and arrow around his waist, and grabbed his spear. The city gates then flew open, and he alone galloped out. A swarm of rebels came up to stop him near the moat, but Taishi Ci killed a bunch of them as he fought his way through the rebel army. When Guan (3) Hai (4) heard that someone from inside the city had come out, he figured it was a messenger on his way to seek help. So he personally led a few hundred riders in pursuit and they surrounded Taishi Ci. But Taishi Ci

pulled out his bow and let arrows fly in all directions. Every shot found its mark, and soon none of the rebels dared to give chase anymore.

Once he got away, Taishi Ci traveled nonstop to Pingyuan County to see Liu Bei. He told Liu Bei about the siege on Beihai Prefecture and offered up Kong Rong's letter. Upon reading the letter, Liu Bei asked Taishi Ci who he was.

"My name is Taishi Ci. I have no connection to Kong Rong by blood or birth, but our thoughts are the same, so I feel an obligation out of loyalty to share his burden. Right now Guan (3) Hai (4) is rebelling. Beihai is under siege, and with no help at hand, it is on the brink of falling. Kong Rong had heard that you, sir, are an honorable and compassionate man and are able to help those in need. So he sent me to fight my way through the siege to come beg for help."

This answer got Liu Bei's attention. Flattered by the fact that Kong Rong actually knew who he was, he gathered up 3,000 veteran troops and set off for Beihai with his brothers Guan Yu and Zhang Fei.

When Guan (3) Hai (4) saw the relief force, he personally led his army out to fight. He figured that with tens of thousands of men going up against Liu Bei's meager 3,000 men, this was going to be a walk in the park. When they had lined up, Guan (3) Hai (4) rode out and challenged for combat. Taishi Ci was just about to go meet him, but Guan Yu was already a step ahead of him. The two tangled as the armies roared.

And surprisingly, this Guan (3) Hai (4) actually lasted a few dozen bouts, which was really a lot more than most of Guan Yu's previous opponents in the story could say. Still, though, in the end, Guan Yu's dragon sabre found its mark, and that was the end of Guan (3) Hai (4). Taishi Ci and Zhang Fei then rode out and stormed into the enemy's formation, while Liu Bei led his army in support. From atop the city walls, Kong Rong saw that Taishi Ci, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei were wreaking havoc in the rebel army, so he led his troops out, and the rebels were squeezed on two sides. The fight quickly turned into a rout, and countless rebels surrendered while the rest scattered.

With the siege lifted, Kong Rong welcomed Liu Bei and company into the city and threw a big party to celebrate. He then introduced Mi Zhu to Liu Bei and mentioned that “Oh by the way, Tao Qian is in trouble with Cao Cao.”

“Tao Qian is a kind and honorable man. It’s a shame that he has been thus framed,” Liu Bei said.

Kong Rong took this opportunity to try to get a little help.

“Sir, you are a member of the house of Han. Right now Cao Cao is doing harm to the common people and bullying the weak. Why don’t you come with me and do something about it?”

“I’m not trying to make excuses,” Liu Bei replied, “but my army is small and I have few warriors. I worry that I won’t be much help.”

“My desire to go help Tao Qian does not rest only on my past connection with him,” Kong Rong said. “This is also a matter of justice. Do you have no wish to help justice prevail?”

“In that case, why don’t you set off first. I will go see Gongsun Zan and ask him to lend him a few thousand soldiers, and I will be right behind you.”

“Sir, you must not go back on your word,” Kong Rong pressed.

“Governor, what kind of man do you take me for?” Liu Bei said. “As the sage said, ‘Death comes to all men, but he who does not keep his word cannot stand.’ Regardless of whether I can get more men, I will be there in person.”

With this assurance, Kong Rong felt a bit more at ease. He asked Mi Zhu to return to Xu Province first to deliver the news that help is on the way, while he himself prepared his forces to set out. One man who won’t be coming along, however, was Taishi Ci.

“I came to help on my mother’s behest,” he said. “Fortunately the danger has passed. I’ve been summoned by Liu (2) Yao (2), the imperial protector of Yang (2) Province. He hails from the same district as me, so I have to go.”

Kong Rong tried to bestow lavish gifts of gold and silk on Taishi Ci, but the latter steadfastly refused

and left for Yang (2) Province. While Kong Rong set off for Xu Province, Liu Bei went to see his friend Gongsun Zan and told him why he was there.

“But there’s no bad blood between you and Cao Cao,” Gongsun Zan said. “Why trouble yourself for someone else’s cause?”

“I have already made a promise, and I cannot go back on my word,” Liu Bei said.

“Alright. I’ll lend you two thousand men.”

“Can I borrow Zhao Yun as well?” Liu Bei asked. Remember Zhao Yun was a valiant warrior under the service of Gongsun Zan, and he and Liu Bei had hit it off right away when they last met. Gongsun Zan agreed, and so Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei set off for Xu Province with their own 3,000 men, while Zhao Yun followed at the head of 2,000 men.

Meanwhile, back at Xu Province, Tao Qian had gotten some good news, first from Mi Zhu that Kong Rong and Liu Bei were on their way, and then from Chen Deng (1), the other official he had sent out for help, had returned from Qing (1) Province with news that Tian (2) Kai (3) was also on his way with a relief force. This news put Tao Qian’s mind somewhat at ease. But Kong Rong and Tian (2) Kai (3) pulled up just short of the city out of fear for the ferocity of Cao Cao’s army. They dared not advance farther and instead set up camp by some hills in the distance. Still, their mere presence gave Cao Cao enough pause that he did not dare to put the city under siege.

When Liu Bei arrived, he went to meet Kong Rong.

“Cao Cao’s army is strong, and Cao Cao is adept at military strategy,” Kong Rong said. “We can’t get into a fight lightly. We must first observe his movements, and then make our move.”

“But I worry that the city is running out of food and cannot hold out for long,” Liu Bei said. “I’ll leave Guan Yu and Zhao Yun, along with 4,000 men, here to help you. Myself and Zhang Fei will fight through Cao Cao’s camp and go into the city to meet with Tao Qian and discuss what to do.”

Since this plan meant he didn't have to really do much of anything, Kong Rong was naturally delighted. So he and Tian (2) Kai (3) set up as if they were planning a two-pronged assault, with Guan Yu and Zhao Yun standing by in support. Liu Bei and Zhang Fei then led 1,000 men and breached the perimeter of Cao Cao's camp. Suddenly, they heard a bang of the drums, and soldiers on foot and horse poured out like waves. At their head was Yu Jin, one of Cao Cao's generals.

"Fools! Where do you think you're going?!" Yu Jin shouted.

Zhang Fei didn't even bother saying anything. He just made straight for Yu Jin, and the two got into it for a while before Liu Bei pulled out his twin swords and directed his force forward. Yu Jin could not hold his ground and fell back. Zhang Fei gave chase all the way to the foot of the city. When Tao Qian saw the red banner with the words "Liu Bei of Pingyuan", he immediately ordered that the city gates be opened, and he greeted Liu Bei when he entered and led him to his residence.

After the customary formalities, Tao Qian held a feast to welcome Liu Bei and his men. During the banquet, Tao Qian was very pleased to find Liu Bei to be a man of dignified bearing and high-minded speech. He was so pleased, in fact, that he told Mi Zhu to go fetch the provincial seal and other tokens of authority, which he then offered to Liu Bei.

"What do you mean by this, sir?" Liu Bei asked in surprise.

"Right now the land is in chaos and the rule of the emperor has weakened," Tao Qian said. "You are a descendant of the royal house of Han. It is only fitting that you should serve your ancestral shrine. I know that I am a useless old man, so I am willingly yielding Xu Province to you. Please do not decline. I will personally write to the court to inform them of the change."

Liu Bei now stood up and bowed, not to accept the offering but to decline it.

"Although I am a descendant of the royal house, I have rendered little service to the country. To be honest, I might not even deserve to be the governor of Pingyuan County. I have come to your aid out of a sense of honor and justice. Are you making this gesture because you think I intend to take your land? If I



harbor such intentions, may heaven disown me!”

“No, I am totally sincere,” Tao Qian replied and insisted time and again that Liu Bei take control of his province. But Liu Bei simply would not hear of it, which is a pretty remarkable statement about his character considering how many other men in his shoes would not think twice about taking the province. I mean, heck, Cao Cao is camped outside the city right now, possibly using his father’s death as an excuse to take by force what Tao Qian is willingly offering up to Liu Bei.

Seeing the two sides at an impasse, Mi Zhu intervened.

“Right now we’ve got enemy soldiers at our gates,” he said. “Let’s focus on defeating the enemy for now. Once peace has been restored, then we can talk about yielding the province.”

“Let me write a letter to Cao Cao first and try to convince him to accept a truce,” Liu Bei said. “If he refuses, then we can talk about fighting him.”

Everyone agreed, and so their army remained inside the city while Liu Bei sent a messenger to Cao Cao. Cao Cao was just having a conference with his generals when word came that a message had arrived from Xu Province. Cao Cao opened it and saw that it was from Liu Bei. The message read,

“Since I first met you during our campaign outside the pass, destiny has carried us to different corners of the realm, and I have not had the chance to pay my respects. Recently, your honorable father met his death at the hands of the dishonorable Zhang Kai (3). This had nothing to do with Governor Tao Qian. Right now, the remnants of the Yellow Turbans are stirring up trouble across the realm, while the former followers of Dong Zhuo are holding the court at their mercy. I pray that you, illustrious sir, will put the needs of the court before your personal vengeance and pull back your army from Xu Province to tackle the country’s problems. This would be a boon not only for Xu province, but also for the whole country.”

Cao Cao did not take too kindly to the letter, though, and he cursed loudly.

“Who does Liu Bei think he is?! How dare he write to me to try to dissuade me? And with such sarcasm in his words too!”

At that he ordered his men to execute the messenger and prepare to attack the city with the full force of his army. But Guo (1) Jia (1), one of his advisers, stopped him.

“Liu Bei has come from a great distance away to render aid to Tao Qian, and he is following proper customs in offering peace before offering battle. You should give him a favorable reply to lure him into complacency, and then attack. That will allow you to sack the city.”

Cao Cao took this advice. So instead of having his head chopped off, the messenger was treated well and asked to wait while Cao Cao composed a reply. But just as Cao Cao and his advisers were discussing how to answer the letter, an urgent message arrived with bad news. Cao Cao’s base of power, Yan (3) Province, had been sacked, and the key city of Puyang (2,2) had been occupied. And the culprit was none other than Lü Bu!

So how did that happen? Well, after escaping the chaos of Li Jue and Guo Si’s sacking of Changan, Lü Bu fled beyond the passes surrounding the capital and began bouncing around. He first went to seek refuge with Yuan Shu. But Yuan Shu refused to give him sanctuary because he deemed, correctly, that Lü Bu was an untrustworthy turncoat. So Lü Bu went to seek refuge with Yuan Shao, who did allow him to stay and, with Lü Bu’s help, defeated a minor rival. But Lü Bu allowed that little bit of success to go to his head, and he started snubbing the other generals serving under Yuan Shao, which made Yuan Shao want to do away with him.

Having worn out his welcome, Lü Bu went to seek refuge with Zhang (1) Yang (2), the governor of Shangdang (4,3) Prefecture, who took him in. But this did not last long either. If you’d remember, when Lü Bu fled Changan, he had left his family there. An official in Changan had kept them hidden and now he secretly sent them to Lu Bu. Unfortunately for this official, it wasn’t secret enough, and when Li Jue and

Guo Si found out, they had him executed. They then wrote to Zhang (1) Yang (2) and instructed him to kill Lu Bu.

So Lu Bu left yet again, this time to go join up with Zhang (1) Miao (3), the governor of Chenliu (2,2) Prefecture. By coincidence, Chen Gong had come to see Zhang (1) Miao (3) at the same time after his unsuccessful attempt to talk Cao Cao out of wanting to raze Xu Province to the ground.

“Right now the country is divided and heroes are rising up left and right,” Chen Gong said to Zhang (1) Miao (3). “You have such vast territory and population at your command, and yet you are having string pulled by others. How demeaning is that? Right now Cao Cao is waging a campaign in the east and has left Yan (3) Province vulnerable. And now you have Lu Bu, one of the great warriors of our time. If you two join forces and seize Yan (3) Province, you won’t have to answer to anyone anymore.”

Zhang Miao (3) was delighted by this suggestion and ordered Lu Bu to sack Yan (3) Province and occupy Puyang (2,2). Only three prefectures in the province remained under Cao Cao’s control, and it was all thanks to Xun (2) Yu (4) and Cheng (2) Yu (4), the two strategists that Cao Cao had left behind to defend the province. They exhausted all their wits to barely hold on to those three prefectures while the rest of the province fell. Cao Cao’s brother, Cao Ren (2), fought numerous battles to try to take back the province but was denied every time.

This bad news left Cao Cao stunned.

“If Yan (3) Province is lost, I would have nowhere to call home. We must act,” he said.

Since he had to call off the attack on Xu Province anyway to go save his home turf, Cao Cao took the opportunity to pretend to do Liu Bei a favor by agreeing to his call for a truce. Cao Cao wrote a reply to Liu Bei, and immediately ordered his army to retreat.

When Cao Cao’s messenger entered Xu Province and told Tao Qian that Cao Cao had called off the attack, Tao Qian was delighted. He sent word outside the city for Kong Rong, Tian Kai (3), Guan Yu and

Zhao Yun to go in the city for a big feast. At the feast, Tao Qian placed Liu Bei in the seat of the host and then turned to everyone present and said,

“I am getting old, and my two sons are worthless and cannot be trusted with important matters of state. Governor Liu is a descendant of the royal house and is virtuous and capable. He can take over Xu Province, and I am willing to yield it to him and retire to tend to my illness.”

But Liu Bei protested yet again.

“Governor Kong Rong brought me here to rescue Xu Province out of a sense of justice. There is no justification for me to take over this land. If I do, all the world will think me dishonorable.”

Mi Zhu now tried to convince Liu Bei to accept.

“The house of Han is faltering,” he said, “and the world is turning upside down. This is the time to make your name and stake your claim. Xu Province is a prosperous land of a million people. You cannot walk away from control of such a land.”

“No, I will never consent to such a thing,” Liu Bei said.

Chen Deng (1), another of Tao Qian’s advisers, now also pressed the issue.

“Imperial Protector Tao is frequently ill and cannot oversee things anymore,” he said. “Sir, please do not refuse.”

Liu Bei responded by suggesting another choice to lead the province.

“Yuan Shu comes from a venerable family that has held high office for four generations. He is based nearby in Shochun (4,1). Why not yield the province to him instead?”

But Kong Rong now chimed in.

“Yuan Shu is like a skeleton in a grave. He is of no significance. If you do not accept this gift from heaven, you will regret it to no end.”

And yet Liu Bei still refused, to the point that it reduced Tao Qian to tears.

“Sir, if you abandon me, I will not be able to die in peace,” he said.

Liu Bei's brothers, having stood by and watched his older brother refuse this amazing gift time and again, finally had seen enough.

"Since imperial protector Tao insists, why don't you just accept control of the province?" Guan Yu said.

Zhang Fei was even more to the point. "It's not like we are taking his land by force. He is offering it to us willingly. Why must you refuse time and again?!"

"You two are trying to make me dishonor myself!" Liu Bei reproached them.

So this went on and on for a while, and Liu Bei steadfastly refused the offer. Finally, Tao Qian relented and suggested an alternative. "Since you refuse to take control of the province, how about this: There is a place nearby called Xiaopei (3,4) and it should suffice for the needs of your army. Why don't you station your forces there so that you can protect the province?"

Everyone chimed in and tried to convince Liu Bei to take up this new offer. Since he has just spent god knows how long declining one generous offer, Liu Bei relented. After the celebration, the gathered leaders went their separate ways. Zhao Yun also took his leave of Liu Bei, and the two bid another teary farewell to one another. Liu Bei then led Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and his own troops to Xiaopei, where they repaired the fortifications and put the residents' minds at ease.

So we'll leave Liu Bei there for now, just hanging out in a tiny little hamlet when he could have been the ruler of a rich province, all thanks to his sense of honor. On the next episode, we'll catch up with Cao Cao, who has gone from revenge mode to survival mode in the blink of an eye. To see how his coming battle with Lu Bu will turn out, tune in next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.