

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 18.

Before we pick up where we left off, I just want to let you know that I have posted a map on the website showing the provinces of China during the time period we are in. We've been jumping from one province to another a lot lately, so I thought it would be helpful for us to have a rough idea of where everything is. So go check it out on at 3kingdomspodcast.com, spelled with the number 3.

Last time, Li Jue and Guo Si, the two guys running things in the capital, simultaneously push the Implode button and blew up the court over a bit of a misunderstanding about which one of them was trying off the other. Li Jue abducted the emperor, and Guo Si held the court officials hostage, until the two sides begrudgingly came to a peace agreement. But then, when the emperor and his entourage were on their way to Hong (2) Nong (2), a district where they were going to temporarily set up shop, Guo Si and Li Jue joined forces again and chased after them, intent on killing the emperor and splitting the empire between the two of them.

At this time, the emperor had so few troops at his disposal that he had to call on three guys who were essentially leaders of bandits for help. These three -- Han (2) Xian (1), Li (3) Yue (4), and Hu (2) Cai (2) -- all were granted clemency and government jobs, and they combined their forces with the tattered remnants of the army led by Dong (3) Cheng (2) and Yang (2) Feng (4), the two generals who had rescued the emperor from his captors.

Meanwhile, Li Jue and Guo Si were in hot pursuit and wreaking havoc on the locals wherever they went. They rounded up the commoners along their way, killed the old and weak, and conscripted the able-bodied men into their armies. When it came time to do battle, they force-marched these unwilling recruits at the front as cannon fodder.

This immense army faced off against the troops defending the emperor, led by Li (3) Yue (4), at the city of Weiyang (4,2). Knowing that he was going up against a bunch of soldiers who just yesterday had been nothing more than bandits, Guo Si ordered his men to throw a bunch of clothes and other semi-valuables along the road. When Li Yue's men saw these, they became preoccupied with gathering up the scraps for themselves and soon lost all semblance of order. At that point, Li Yue and Guo Si swept in and routed Li Yue (4).

Knowing that they can't stand up to this wave of enemy soldiers, Yang Feng and Dong Cheng escorted the emperor as they fled north, with the rebels in hot pursuit.

"We are in dire straits!" Li Yue said. "Your majesty should mount a horse and go on ahead!"

"No, I cannot bear to abandon my officials," the emperor said.

Upon hearing this, all the officials wept as they accompanied the imperial litter on foot. But this touching moment did not lessen the danger. In fact, one of the newly recruited commanders, Hu (2) Cai (2), perished in the chaos. Seeing that things were now really, really bad, Yang Feng and Dong Cheng asked the emperor to abandon his carriage, and they walked to the bank of the Yellow River, where Li Yue found a small boat to ferry him across amid the wintery chill.

When the emperor and empress walked, with help, to the bank, they saw that it was too high to climb down to the boat. Meanwhile, the rebel army was nearly upon them.

"Quick, we can make a rope out of the reins of our horses and use it to lower his majesty to the boat," Yang Feng said.

Just then, Fu (2) De (2), the brother of the empress, brought forth 10 bolts of silk, which he said he picked up from the rampaging soldiers. Of course, one has to wonder what he was doing carrying bolts of silk around while fleeing with the emperor. But nevermind that. This was just what they needed. They tied the silk end to end to make a rope long enough to reach the bottom of the bank, and they tied it around the emperor's waist and lowered him to the boat. Then Fu (2) De (2) carried the empress down

to the boat as well. But as they were pushing away from the shore, many of the people who were still on the bank tried to rush onto the boat. Li Yue stood at the front of the boat with sword in hand and killed everyone who tried to board. After the emperor and empress got across, the boat turned around and came back to ferry some more people across, and the mad scene replayed itself. People who tried to force their way onto the boat ended up with their fingers cut off, and their cries shook the heavens.

Only the emperor, empress, and about a dozen or so people made it to the other side. Yang Feng managed to find an ox cart to carry the emperor to Dayang (4,2), where they spent the night in a little hut. They had no food with them, since everything was left behind in the mad dash to safety. Some elderly folks from the nearby countryside offered the emperor and empress some millet, but this was way too coarse for the royal palate, and so they went hungry.

The next day, the emperor bestowed fancy generalships on the newly recruited Li Yue (4) and Han (2) Xian (1), and the entourage got on the road again. Suddenly, two court officials caught up to the entourage and knelt in front of the emperor's cart while crying. These were Yang Biao (1) and Han (2) Rong (2), and their weeping brought the emperor and empress to tears as well.

"Li Yue and Guo Si usually listen to me," Han (2) Rong (2) said. "I will risk my life and go try to convince them to call off their pursuit. Your majesty, please take care."

With that, Han Rong departed. Li Yue then escorted the emperor to Yang Feng's camp for a short rest, and Yang Feng asked the emperor to temporarily set up in Anyi (1,4) County. When they got there, the place was so podunk that there was not a single multi-story building in sight. The royal couple were lodged in a simple farmhouse with a thatched roof and no gate. A screen of brambles on all sides served as an outer wall. When the emperor met with his officials, they met in the farmhouse, while the generals and soldiers stood guard outside.

And yet, even in a court as sorry as this, somebody was letting power go to his head. Li Yue and his fellow former bandits, on the strength of the fact that they were the only defense available, did as they

pleased. If any official ran afoul of them in the slightest, they would get a tongue-lashing in front of the emperor. Li Yue also gave the emperor unpalatable wine and food, which the emperor was too afraid to refuse. Li Yue and Han Xian (1) also nominated a bunch of riff-raffs for high office, including the likes of outcasts, common foot soldiers, and sorcerers. This was about as pathetic as an imperial court could get.

There was one glimmer of good news in the midst of this misery. Han (2) Rong (2) somehow succeeded in convincing Li Jue and Guo Si to call off their attack, and the two even released the officials and courtiers that they had taken hostage. But that was it for the good news, and more bad news piled on in the form of a severe famine that forced the commoners to survive on tree leaves and left countless bodies strewn across the land. The emperor got a little bit of relief when Zhang (1) Yang (2), the governor of Henei (2,4) Prefecture, offered up some grain and meat, while Wang (2) Yi (4), the governor of Hedong (2,1) Prefecture, offered up silk and cloth.

Yang Feng and Dong Cheng talked it over, and they decided that things simply could not go on like this. So they sent some men ahead to repair the palace in Luoyang, and prepared to move the court back to the former capital of the empire. But Li Yue wasn't having it.

"Luoyang is the former capital," Dong Cheng said to Li Yue. "Anyi (1,4) is too small for the court. The proper thing to do is to return to Luoyang."

"If you guys want to go, then go. I'm staying here," Li Yue said.

Well, Dong Cheng and Yang Feng called Li Yue's bluff, and the royal entourage prepared to hit the road. But Li Yue didn't really mean it when he said he was staying in Anyi (1,4). Instead, he sent a message to Li Jue and Guo Si, suggesting that they all join up and abduct the emperor. Dong Cheng, Yang Feng, and Han Xian (1), however, were onto Li Yue's scheme, and they set out with the emperor in the middle of the night and made a run for it.

When Li Yue got word of this, he didn't even bother to wait for Li Jue and Guo Si. He just led his own army and chased after the fleeing entourage. When he caught up to them at the foot of Mount Ji (1), he pretended to be Li Jue and Guo Si and shouted for the emperor to stop. The sight of torches covering the hillside scared the emperor to no end. But it was all building up to an anticlimactic finish.

"This is not Li Jue and Guo Si. It's Li Yue," Yang Feng said, and he ordered his top general Xu Huang to

go meet the enemy. Li Yue came out to fight Xu Huang, but was cut down after just one bout. Li Yue's men scattered, and the emperor and his entourage made it safely through the pass at Mount Ji (1). On the other side of the pass, Zhang Yang (2), the governor of Henei Prefecture, greeted them with grain and silk, which prompted the emperor to name him regent-general. If you're keeping count, that's the third regent-general in the last two episodes. Zhang Yang (2) then moved his troops to a location northwest of Luoyang to provide some protection for the emperor.

When the emperor entered Luoyang, the city was a pitiful sight. The palace had been burned to the ground, courtesy of Dong Zhuo when he relocated the capital to Changan, and the walls were crumbling. The streets and markets were deserted, and overgrown weeds were popping up everywhere.

The emperor ordered Yang Feng to oversee the construction of a small dwelling to serve as a temporary palace. In the meantime, when the court met, all the officials stood amid the thorny bushes. The emperor ordered that the year be changed to Year 1 of the Era of Reestablished Peace. But unfortunately, it was also turning out to be year whatever of continued famine. The few hundred families that were still living in Luoyang had no food and were reduced to stripping bark off the trees outside the city or eating grass roots to survive. Every court official below the rank of the Secretariat had to personally go gather firewood and other fuel, and many of them simply died amid the rubbles of the city. These were truly the deepest depths to which the Han Dynasty had sunk.

Yang Biao (1), the grand commandant, now suggested the emperor seek some outside help.

"The decree that your majesty had given me previously to summon Cao Cao has not yet been dispatched," he said. "Right now he is thriving in Shandong. You can summon him to court to support the royal house."

"I've already given you the decree," the emperor said. "There is no need for you to ask me again. Just send someone to summon him."

In other words, why the heck haven't you summoned him already? So Yang Biao sent a messenger to see Cao Cao. While this was happening, Cao Cao had already gotten word that the emperor had returned to Luoyang, and he was discussing the situation with his advisers. One of those advisers, Xun (2)

Yu (4), told him that this was an opportunity Cao Cao could not afford to miss, and he cited two precedents as illustration of why.

“More than 800 years ago,” Xun (2) Yu (4) said, “the Lord-Patriarch Wen of the state of Jin protected the king of the failing Zhou Dynasty, and the various lords accepted his leadership. When the Supreme Ancestor of the Han conducted mourning service for the ruler of the kingdom of Chu (3), whom he defeated to win the empire, it won the hearts of the people throughout the land. Right now the emperor has been exiled from his capital. This is your time to seize this moment and lead your forces to serve the throne. If you do not do it, then someone else will soon beat us to the punch.”

Cao Cao was very pleased by this analysis, and he was just about to mobilize his forces when the emperor’s messenger arrived with the imperial decree to summon him. Cao Cao accepted the decree and soon began marching.

Meanwhile, back in Luoyang, as if the emperor didn’t have enough to worry about, he soon got word that Li Jue and Guo Si were approaching with their armies. The emperor was very concerned and asked Yang Feng what to do.

“We are willing to fight to the death against those traitors to protect your majesty,” Yang Feng and Han (2) Xian (1) said.

But Dong Cheng, the emperor’s uncle, disagreed.

“The city’s fortifications are weak and our troops few,” he said. “If we fight and lose, what then? Instead, why don’t we temporarily move to Shandong?”

The emperor agreed with Dong Cheng, and they set out for Shandong immediately. The officials did not have horses, so they all followed the imperial litter on foot. But they had barely left Luoyang when they saw a vast army approaching, kicking up enough dust to block out the sun and making enough noise to shake the heavens. The emperor and empress were so frightened that they could not speak, but suddenly, a rider approached, and it turned out to be the messenger they had sent to summon Cao Cao. The messenger kneeled in front of the emperor’s carriage and said,

“General Cao has mobilized all the troops in Shandong to answer your majesty’s summon. He heard

that Li Jue and Guo Si were encroaching on Luoyang, so he sent Xiahou Dun as his vanguard, along with 10 top generals and 50,000 crack troops to protect you.”

This put the emperor’s mind at ease. Soon, Xiahou Dun, accompanied by Xu (2) Chu (3), Dian (3) Wei (2), and others, arrived and bowed to the emperor. The emperor had barely finished commending them for their efforts when word came that another army was coming from the east. The emperor sent Xiahou Dun to go check this out, and it turned out that it was Cao Cao’s infantry arriving, and soon Cao Hong (2), Li Dian, and Yue (4) Jin (4) came to pay their respects to the emperor.

“My brother heard that the traitors’ forces were closing in and worried that Xiahou Dun would be outnumbered, so he sent us along to lend a hand,” Cao Hong said.

“General Cao is a true defender of the throne!” the emperor said, and he ordered the generals to escort his party forward. Scouts soon arrived with news that Li Jue and Guo Si were getting close. The emperor ordered Xiahou Dun to split his forces in two and meet both traitors’ armies, so Xiahou Dun and Cao Hong each led a force, with cavalry in front and infantry right behind. Cao Cao’s troops routed Li Jue and Guo Si’s armies, killing more than 10,000 enemy soldiers in the process.

After this bloodbath, Cao Cao’s officers escorted the emperor back to his palace in Luoyang, while Xiahou Dun stationed his troops outside the city. The next day, Cao Cao arrived with the bulk of his army. Once they set up camp, he went to see the emperor and prostrated himself in front of the throne. The emperor asked him to rise and commended him for his service.

“I have long been indebted to the country and have wanted to repay its kindness,” Cao Cao said. “The traitors Li Jue and Guo Si have committed crimes that exceed all bounds. Your servant has more than 200,000 crack troops ready to crush the traitors on your majesty’s behalf. Please take care of yourself, for the sake of the country.”

The emperor then appointed Cao Cao commander of the capital districts, granted him power to conduct all military operations, and gave him control of the Secretariat, which sends all of the imperial decrees. So Cao Cao’s stock just skyrocketed.

Meanwhile, Li Jue and Guo Si had gotten word of Cao Cao’s arrival, and they wanted to fight him

quickly. But their adviser, Jia (3) Xu (3), was against it.

“Cao Cao’s forces are too strong,” he said. “Why don’t you surrender instead and ask for amnesty?”

“How dare you try to sap our fighting spirit?!” Li Jue barked at him, as he pulled out his sword, intending to kill Jia Xu. The officers present talked him out of it, but Jia Xu could see the writing on the wall. That night, he abandoned the traitors and went back to his hometown to dodge the coming storm.

The next day, Li Jue led his forces out to take on Cao Cao. Cao Cao first ordered Xu Chu, Cao Ren, and Dian (3) Wei (2) to lead 300 armored cavalry and slash through Li Jue’s formation three times before Cao Cao set up his formation. Once the two sides had lined up, Li Jue’s two nephews, Li Xian (1) and Li Bie (2), rode out to the front of their lines. Before the two sides could even exchange one word, Xu Chu galloped out from Cao Cao’s lines, raised his blade, and with one stroke, cut down Li Xian (1). The swiftness of the kill startled Li Bie (2) so much that he fell off his horse, which made it pretty convenient for Xu Chu to finish him off as well. When Xu Chu rode back to see Cao Cao with the two enemy officers’ heads in tow, Cao Cao patted him on the back and praised him.

“You’re my Fan (2) Kuai (4)!” said Cao Cao, making a reference to gallant warrior who helped found the Han Dynasty.

Cao Cao then ordered Xiahou Dun to attack from the left, and Cao Ren from the right, while Cao Cao himself charged up the middle. At the sound of the drums, all three forces surged forward, and the enemy scattered. Cao Cao, with his sword in hand, personally pressed his army forward, and they pursued and slaughtered the enemy through the night, killing countless while many others surrendered. Li Jue and Guo Si managed get out alive and flee toward the west, desperate as stray dogs. With their army gone and knowing that they’ve made far too many enemies for anyone to take them in, the two holed up in a mountain somewhere and turned to banditry for a living, and that’s where we’ll leave these former powerbrokers of the court.

Cao Cao, meanwhile, returned victoriously to Luoyang and stationed his troops outside the city. But not everyone was happy about his glory. Yang Feng and Han Xian, two of the generals who had accompanied the emperor as he fled from Li Jue and Guo Si, now sensed that they were on the outs.

“Now that Cao Cao has scored such a huge victory for the court, all the power will no doubt fall into his hands. How can there be room for the two of us,” they said to each other. So they told the emperor that they were going after Li Jue and Guo Si, but in reality, they led their troops and went off to set up shop in Daliang (4,2). We won’t worry about them for now.

So one day, the emperor sent a messenger to summon Cao Cao to the palace. When Cao Cao met the messenger, he saw that this man had clear eyes and an energetic look. This struck Cao Cao as particularly odd because there’s a pretty bad famine going on and everyone in the capital carried the look of starvation, with the lone exception of this guy. So Cao Cao asked him for his secret.

“There is no secret,” the messenger said. “I’ve just been eating very simply for the last 30 years.”

Cao Cao nodded and asked the man for his current position.

“My name is Dong (3) Zhao (1),” the messenger said. “I was recommended for a position because of my filial piety and devotion. I previously served Yuan Shao and Zhang Yang (2). When I heard that the emperor had returned to Luoyang, I came to serve him and was appointed court counselor.”

Cao Cao got up and said, “I have long heard of your name. It is my great fortune to meet you here.”

And then Cao Cao served wine to welcome Dong (3) Zhao (1) and introduced him to one of his top advisers, Xun (2) Yu (4). As they were chatting, a messenger reported that an army had left and was headed east with no explanation. Cao Cao immediately dispatched someone to find out more, but Dong (3) Zhao (1) said, “This is Yang Feng, a former officer under Li Jue, and Han Xian (1), a former rebel leader. They are moving their troops to Daliang (4,2) because you, illustrious sir, have arrived.”

“Do they distrust me?” Cao Cao asked.

“They are idiots. There is no need to worry about them,” Dong (3) Zhao (1) replied.

“And what about Li Jue and Guo Si?”

“They are tigers without claws and birds without wings. You will capture them soon, so have no worries.”

Cao Cao was hitting it off with Dong (3) Zhao (1), so he started to discuss the affairs of state with

him.

“Sir, you have mobilized your army to come serve the throne and purge the chaos caused by the traitors,” Dong Zhao (1) said. “This service is on par with the accomplishments of the five hegemonies of the Spring and Autumn Period. But there are many generals with their own ambitions, and they might not obey you. If you remain here, there may be trouble. The best thing to do is to move the emperor to Xuchang (3,1). However, the court has been through recent upheaval and has only just returned to the old capital. Everyone is hoping for stability, so another move will be resented by many. Nonetheless, he who undertakes extraordinary acts earns extraordinary merit. The choice is yours.”

Cao Cao held Dong Zhao’s hand and smiled.

“This is my intent as well. But with Yang Feng in Daliang (4,2) and the officials at court against the move, won’t things turn against me?”

“That’s easy,” Dong Zhao said. “Write to Yang Feng to reassure him. Then tell the court officials that because the capital has no food, you would like to move the court to Xuchang, where you can virtually guarantee regular grain shipments. When the officials hear this, they will go along.”

Cao Cao was delighted by this suggestion. As Dong Zhao took his leave, Cao Cao held his hand again and said, “Whenever I have a big decision to make, may I always have your counsel.”

So Cao Cao met with his advisers in private to discuss moving the court to Xuchang. Meanwhile, Wang (2) Li (4), the historian-astrologer and privy counselor, told Liu Ai (4), the director of the imperial clan, “I have been observing the stars, and they foretell the rise of a new sovereign. The Han has run its course. Another house will rise up from the area of the ancient Jin (4) and Wei (4).”

When Cao Cao heard about what Wang (2) Li (4) had said, he sent a secret message to him and said, “I know that you are loyal to the Han. However, the ways of heaven are too profound for man to follow, so I would prefer you did not speak too much of them.”

But at the same time, Cao Cao told Xun (2) Yu (4) what Wang Li (4) had said, and Xun Yu was of the opinion that this matches up with what Dong Zhao had told Cao Cao. This helped Cao Cao make up his mind, and the next day, he went to see the emperor.

“The capital has long been in ruins and is beyond repair,” Cao Cao said. “Besides, it is difficult to transport grain here. On the other hand, Xuchang is near Luyang (3,2). Its walls, buildings, money, grains, and people are more than enough for our needs. If I may be so bold, I would like to request that your majesty move to Xuchang. I hope you will agree.”

Well, the emperor did not dare to disagree, since Cao Cao’s massive army was his only protection. And the court officials were all wary of Cao Cao’s power, so no one dared to voice any opposition. The decision made, the court set out on a designated date, with Cao Cao and his army in escort and the court officials following along.

But they hadn’t gone far when they reached a high hill where loud roars rose up and an army led by Yang Feng and Han Xian blocked the path. Xu Huang, Yang Feng’s top warrior, was riding in front and shouted, “Cao Cao! Where are you going with the emperor?!”

Cao Cao rode out to take a look and was impressed by Xu Huang’s commanding appearance. He ordered Xu Chu to go out and fight Xu Huang. The two went back and forth for 50-some bouts with neither gaining the upper hand, at which point Cao Cao ordered his army to fall back. He then gathered his strategists and said, “Yang Feng and Han Xian are of no concern. But Xu Huang is a fine general. I cannot bear to take him by force. Could we convince him to join us?”

Man (2) Chong (3), the acting military aide and one of those guys who came on board when Cao Cao was having a hiring spree a few episodes back, said, “My lord, do not concern yourself. I have crossed paths with Xu Huang before. Tonight, I will disguise myself as a common soldier, sneak into his camp, and convince him to surrender to you.”

Cao Cao gave him the ok, and Man (2) Chong (3) snuck into Xu Huang’s camp that night. As he made his way to Xu Huang’s tent, he saw that Xu Huang was sitting in full armor in the candlelight. Man (2) Chong (3) stepped in, bowed, and said, “My old friend, how have you been?”

Startled, Xu Huang looked up and said, “Aren’t you Man (2) Chong (3)? What are you doing here?”

“I am now a military aide for General Cao. I saw you from across the battlefield today and wanted to say something to you. So I have risked my life to come here.”

Xu Huang asked Man Chong to sit down and asked for an explanation.

“Sir, few can match your valor,” Man Chong said. “So why do you sell yourself short by serving the likes of Yang Feng and Han Xian? General Cao is a hero of the times and his thirst for men of talent is known throughout the realm. Today, when he witnessed your valor, he expressed great respect for you and could not bear to fight you to the death. So he sent me here to ask you to join him? Sir, why don’t you abandon the darkness for the light and help us accomplish great deeds?”

Xu Huang considered these words for a long time, and then sighed.

“[Sigh] I know that Yang Feng and Han Xian are not the type to accomplish much of anything. It’s just that I have been serving them for a long time and cannot bear to part.”

“Have you not heard of the saying that the wise bird chooses its branch, just as the wise man chooses his master?” Man Chong said. “A real man would not miss an opportunity to serve a worthy master.”

Xu Huang now rose and thanked Man Chong. “I shall accept your offer,” he said.

“Well then, why not kill Yang Feng and Han Xian as an introductory gift for General Cao?” Man Chong said.

“It is dishonorable to kill your master. I will never do such a thing,” Xu Huang said.

“Sir, you are truly a man of honor,” Man Chong said.

And so Xu Huang led the few dozen riders under his personal command and followed Man Chong toward Cao Cao’s camp that very night. But word of this defection soon reached Yang Feng, who flew into a rage and led a thousand riders in pursuit, shouting, “Xu Huang, you traitor! Stop!”

But just as they were closing in, an explosive sounded, and the entire hillside was lit up with torches as soldiers in ambush poured out, with Cao Cao at their head, yelling, “I have been waiting for you for a long time. Don’t you dare try to escape!”

Yang Feng was caught off guard and hurriedly tried to retreat, but he was already surrounded. Fortunately for him, Han Xian arrived at the same time with a relief force, and the two sides scrummed for a while. Yang Feng managed to slip away, but Cao Cao’s army got the upperhand, and the majority of Yang Feng and Han Xian’s soldiers surrendered. The two defeated generals led what remained of their

armies and went to seek refuge with Yuan Shu.

With victory in hand, Cao Cao returned to camp, and Man Chong introduced Xu Huang. Cao Cao was delighted and rewarded him handsomely. The procession then continued to Xuchang without any more trouble. Once there, they constructed palaces, set up ancestral shrines, established the court and the governing apparatus, fortified the city, and built storehouses.

Dong Cheng and 12 others were given lordships of the first rank, but Cao Cao alone held the power of doling out rewards and punishments. He named himself regent-general and the Lord of Wuping (3,2). He appointed his chief adviser Xun (2) Yu (4) to the position of privy counselor and executor of the Secretariat, which, as we mentioned earlier, was where imperial decrees originated from. His other advisers were all given important civilian posts, while his officers were all made generals, commandants, and district military commanders. In short, control of the court and the military now rested firmly in Cao Cao's hands. Whenever there was an important matter, it had to go through Cao Cao BEFORE it was presented to the emperor.

So Cao Cao was now in the same position that Dong Zhuo, Li Jue, and Guo Si had once held. Those other three all created chaos with their powers, and their reigns lasted all but a few years and ended in disaster. Will Cao Cao fare any better? And what will be his first order of business now that he holds the court in the palm of his hand? Find out next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.