

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 36.

Last time, we saw Liu Bei and his brothers reunite. And then we hopped over to the Southlands, where Sun Ce just got ambushed by a nearly successful assassination attempt. His doctor ordered him to rest peacefully for a hundred days to avoid aggravating his injuries, but ever the impatient man, Sun Ce managed to find plenty of aggravation, first when one of Cao Cao's advisers apparently dissed him, which prompted him to start planning an attack on Cao Cao. Then in a passing priest named Yu (2) Ji (2), whom everyone except Sun Ce thought was an immortal. Sun Ce, however, had a hissy fit when he saw how everyone kowtowed to this Taoist priest, and he threw Yu Ji in jail, even though the priest was just minding his own business.

When Sun Ce returned to his residence that day, word of his run-in with Yu (2) Ji (2) had already reached his mother, Madame Wu (2). And Madame Wu (2) summoned her son to her quarters.

"I heard that you have imprisoned the immortal Yu (2)," she said. "He has treated many people's illnesses, and commoners and soldiers alike venerate him. You must not harm him."

"He is but a sorcerer and has used his tricks to fool everyone," Sun Ce replied. "He must not be spared."

When his mother tried time and again to change his mind, Sun Ce went, "Mommmy ..." Well, actually, he said, "Mother, do not listen to the nonsense being spewed by outsiders. I will handle this in my own way."

His own way meant dragging Yu Ji out of his jail cell for interrogation. The jailers were big fans of the immortal Yu, so while he was in his cell, they removed all of his restraints. Only when he was to be brought out for questioning did they put his chains back on. Well, Sun Ce did not take kindly to this

when he found out. He severely punished the jailers and tossed Yu Ji back in his cell, in chains and cangue this time.

Meanwhile, dozens of Sun Ce's officials, including his top adviser Zhang (1) Zhao (1), signed a memorial to him begging him to spare Yu Ji. But this just aggravated Sun Ce even more.

"Sirs, you are all educated scholars. Why do you not see logic?" he said to his officials. "The former imperial protector of Jiao (1) Province believed such false doctrines. He often strummed his zither, burned incense, and bound his head with a red handkerchief, claiming they helped to stimulate his army. And yet, he was killed by the enemy. Such superstitions do nothing, but you have not yet recognized that. I intend to execute Yu Ji to alert the people to such deceptions."

One of Sun Ce's advisers, Lü (3) Fan (4), tried to give Yu Ji a way out.

"I have often heard that Priest Yu can control the weather," he said. "We are in the midst of a drought. Why not order him to summon rain to atone for his offense?"

"Fine. Let's see what that sorcerer will do," Sun Ce said. So he ordered his men to fetch Yu Ji and release him from his restraints. He then ordered the priest to go to the top of an altar and pray for rain.

Yu Ji accepted the command and proceeded to take a bath and change his clothes, since apparently one has to be clean to get on the same page with heaven. He then bound himself atop the altar under a blazing sun, while people flooded the streets to get a glimpse of the immortal at work.

"I shall pray for 30 inches of rain to bring relief to the people," Yu Ji told the spectators. "However, I still cannot escape death."

"If your prayer is effective, his lordship will surely be convinced," the crowd said.

"My allotted time is up," Yu Ji replied. "I don't I shall escape my fate."

Momentarily, an order from Sun Ce arrived at the altar: If no rain falls by noon time, Yu Ji was to be burned alive. The guards were ordered to build a pyre while everyone waited for noon to roll around. As the designated hour drew near, a wild wind began to rage, and dense clouds converged.

“It’s almost noon,” Sun Ce said. “I only see clouds, but no rain. He is nothing but a fraud.”

So he ordered his men to throw Yu Ji onto the pyre and start the fire. Just as the pyre was lit, a trail of black smoke soared toward the sky, and with a loud crackle came thunder and lightning, followed by a torrential downpour. Mere moments later, the streets had turned into an overflowing river, reaching 30 inches of rain with plenty of room to spare.

At that moment, Yu Ji, lying flat on the pyre, let out a loud shout, and the storm ceased and the sky immediately cleared up and the sun came back out from behind the clouds. Everyone, from officials to commoners, helped Yu Ji off the pyre, untied him, and bowed to him to express their gratitude.

If you thought Sun Ce would finally see the light after this demonstration, you would be wrong, and seeing everyone paying no heed to their clothes being soaked and kneeling in the water to pay homage to Yu Ji only made him angrier.

“Rain is determined by heaven and earth!” Sun Ce scowled. “This sorcerer just got lucky! Why are you all so ecstatic over nothing?!”

He then gripped his sword and ordered the guards to execute Yu Ji at once. When his officials tried to dissuade him, he got even angrier.

“Are you all trying to follow Yu Ji into rebellion?!”

Well, since he mentioned the R word, all his officials shut up and did not dare to beg anymore. Sun Ce then ordered his guards to proceed. One of the guards swung his knife, and Yu Ji’s head hit

the ground. A trail of bluish smoke rose from his body and floated toward the northeast. Sun Ce then ordered the corpse be put on public display as a warning against superstitions.

A storm raged overnight. The next morning, Yu Ji's body had vanished. When the guards who were supposed to be, well, guarding the body reported this to Sun Ce, he became aggravated again and wanted to execute the guards. Suddenly, he saw a man striding toward him. It was none other than Yu Ji. In a fit of anger, Sun Ce was just about to pull out his sword to kill the priest again when he suddenly fainted and collapsed to the ground. His attendants hurriedly helped him into his quarters and it was a while before he came to.

Sun Ce's mother, Madam Wu (2), now came to check on him and said, "My son, you brought this calamity upon yourself by wrongfully killing the immortal."

But Sun Ce laughed this off.

"I have followed my father on campaigns since I was young. I have killed countless people. Where is the logic in believing that killing this one person would bring calamity? If anything, killing that sorcerer eliminated a potential calamity, not cause one."

"Things have gotten this bad because you refuse to believe," Madam Wu said. "You need to do some good deeds to atone for it."

"My life rests in the hands of heaven," Sun Ce said. "A sorcerer can never harm me. What do I need to atone for?"

Well, Madame Wu was getting nowhere with her son, so she took a different tact. She secretly instructed the attendants to go and do some good deeds on Sun Ce's behalf.

Around 9 o'clock that night, Sun Ce was lying in his bed chamber when suddenly a chilling wind swept through the room, extinguishing the candles before they flickered back on again. In the dim candle light, Sun Ce saw Yu Ji standing by his bed.

"I am dedicated to exterminating the supernatural from the world of men!" Sun Ce screamed. "You are but a ghost from the shadows. How dare you approach me?!"

As he spoke, Sun Ce pulled out the sword hanging by his bed and chucked it at Yu Ji. But just as quickly as he appeared, the priest vanished again.

When Sun Ce's mother heard about this, she became extremely worried. Sun Ce, trying to put her mind at ease, tried to put up a strong front despite his wounds, but she was not buying it. She told him:

"Confucius said that ghostly spirits possess inexhaustible potency. He also said, 'Pray ye to the spirits dispersed above and concentrated below.' We can't not believe in ghosts. You wrongfully killed Priest Yu. How can there be no retribution? I have ordered services for your health to be held in the Temple of Precious Clarity. You should go in person and pray. Then things will settle down."

Sun Ce dared not disobey his mother's wishes. So he begrudgingly rode in a sedan chair to the temple. The priests there welcomed him in and asked him to offer incense. In an act of defiance, Sun Ce did offer incense, but he did not offer any prayers or apologies for what he had done.

Suddenly, the smoke from the incense hanged low in the air and formed a canopy. Atop this canopy sat, you guessed it, Yu Ji. When Sun Ce saw this, his temper flared again, and he spat, cursed, and stomped out of the sanctuary. As he was walking out, he saw Yu Ji perched on the temple gate, glowering at him.

"Do you see that demon?" Sun Ce asked his followers, but everyone said no. This made Sun Ce's blood boil even more, and he hurled his sword toward Yu Ji. Where the sword landed, a man fell. But

when everyone gathered around the body, they saw that it was the guard who had executed Yu Ji. The sword had been lodged in his head, and blood poured from every orifice of the corpse.

Sun Ce ordered the body be removed and buried. But as he walked out of the temple, he saw Yu Ji walking in through the gate.

“This temple harbors demons!” Sun Ce said. So he sat in front of the temple and ordered 500 soldiers to dismantle the place. As the soldiers climbed onto the rooftop to remove the tilework, Yu Ji appeared on the roof and started hurling tiles down toward the ground.

Sun Ce said, well fine, I’ll do you one better. He then ordered his men to kick all the priests out of the temple and set the place on fire. As the flames raged, however, Sun Ce once again saw Yu Ji standing in the fire.

Sun Ce stormed off in a huff and went back home, but there, he saw Yu Ji once again, standing by the entrance. So Sun Ce said the heck with this. He didn’t even go into his residence. Instead, he mobilized his army, led them outside the city, and set up camp. He then summoned all his officers to discuss allying with Yuan Shao and moving against Cao Cao. But all of his officers advised him to rest and recover before taking any military action.

That night, as Sun Ce slept in his tent, he got another visit from, who else, Yu Ji, who came in with his hair down. Sun Ce could be heard screaming in his tent all night. The next day, Madame Wu sent word summoning Sun Ce back to his home, and Sun Ce complied.

When she saw how emaciated her son had become, Madame Wu wept, “My son. What has happened to you?”

When Sun Ce took a look in the mirror, he was taken aback by how emaciated he looked. He cried out to his attendants, “How did I get so frail?” But before he had finished speaking, he saw Yu Ji standing in the mirror. Sun Ce smacked the mirror with his hand and let out a loud cry. His wounds reopened, and he fainted and collapsed to the ground.

Madame Wu instructed the men to help Sun Ce onto his bed. When he came to a moment later, he sighed and said, "My days are done!"

And so the leader of the Southlands summoned his officials, led by Zhang Zhao (1), as well as his younger brother Sun (1) Quan (2), to his bedside.

"In this time of upheaval, there is great potential in the Southlands," he told them. "We have a substantial population and the natural defense of the rivers. I now ask Zhang Zhao and all of you to help my brother."

He then took his seal and cord, both symbols of power, gave them to Sun Quan (2), and said, "When it comes to mobilizing the masses of the Southlands, making snap decisions on the battlefield, and contending with adversaries for dominion, you are not my equal. However, when it comes to finding and using capable men and getting the most out of everyone to preserve the Southlands, I am no match for you. Never forget how difficult and painful it was for your father and elder brother to build what we have, and be vigilant in guarding it."

In other words, I did all the hard work in carving out this little empire. Don't screw it up. For his part, Sun Quan cried bitterly as he prostrated to receive the seal and the cord. Sun Ce then turned to his mother and said,

"You child's time is up and can no longer serve you, good mother. I have transferred power to my younger brother. I hope you will guide him and instruct him to never neglect those who have served his father and brother."

At this, Madame Wu wept and said, "But what if your brother is too young to shoulder such a great burden?"

"My brother's talent is 10 times mine," Sun Ce said. "He is up to the task. If there is an internal problem you cannot resolve, consult Zhang Zhao. If there is an external problem you cannot resolve,

consult Zhou (1) Yu (2). My regret is that Zhou Yu is not here and I cannot give him these instructions myself.”

Sun Ce now turned to his other younger brothers and said, “After I’m dead, you all must lend Sun Quan your full support. You also must band together to root out anyone in our clan who harbors thoughts of treason. Any renegade from our flesh and bone may not be buried in our ancestral grave.”

All of his brothers wept and accepted this command. Sun Ce then turned to his wife, Da (4) Qiao (2), and said, “We must unfortunately part midway through our journey. Honor my mother with your filial love. When you see your sister, ask her to tell her husband Zhou Yu to faithfully serve my brother, for the sake of our friendship.”

With that, Sun Ce closed his eyes and breathed his last. He was but 26 when he died. A poet later praised him thus:

His triumphs in the Southlands  
Made men declare “Xiang Yu lives again!”  
With the cunning of a tiger set to lunge,  
And the decisiveness of an eagle poised to plunge,  
His dominion made the south secure  
And carried his fair name across the realm.  
Leaving behind an unfulfilled ambition,  
He charged Zhou Yu to bring it to fruition.

When he saw that his brother had died, Sun Quan wept on the floor in front of the bed. But Zhang Zhao now reproached him: “My lord, now is not the time for your tears. You must see to the funeral arrangements and take charge of the affairs of state.”



So Sun Quan dried his eyes, and Zhang Zhao told Sun Quan's uncle Sun Jing (4) to take care of the funeral arrangements. He then asked Sun Quan to go out and receive the acclamation of the officials in the great hall.

Now you might notice that Sun Quan's name sounds quite similar to that of one of Liu Bei's advisers, Sun Qian. Of course there are no relations between the two, but the similar sounding names might cause some confusion. Most of the time for the rest of the novel, it's going to be pretty clear whether we are talking about the leader of the Southlands or Liu Bei's adviser, but in the rare cases where there might be confusion, I'll be sure to clarify which one I am talking about.

This Sun Quan is going to be around for quite a while, so a little introduction is in order. He had a square jaw and a broad mouth, with jade green eyes and a purplish beard. Some years ago, an envoy from the Han court visited the Southlands and met all the sons of the house of Sun, and he said, "In my view, though these sons of Sun all have their own splendid talents, none are fated to live long, except for Sun Quan. His striking and heroic looks and massive frame indicate he is destined for nobility and long life."

Well, that prognostication is nice and all, but right now Sun Quan had bigger concerns, like establishing himself as the leader of the Southlands and managing a transition of power that's fraught with uncertainty. He got some good news, though, when he got word that Zhou Yu had led his troops back from Baqiu (1,1), the key strategic location he was defending.

"With Zhou Yu back, I can breathe easy now," Sun Quan said when he heard this news.

So as it turned out, Zhou Yu was already on his way back. He had heard that Sun Ce was injured in an ambush and was coming back to check on him. But en route, he heard that Sun Ce had already

died, so he traveled day and night to come mourn his old friend. When he saw Sun Ce's casket, Zhou Yu wept and prostrated on the ground.

At that moment, Madame Wu came out and relayed to Zhou Yu the final instructions from Sun Ce. Upon hearing his friend's request that he help Sun Quan, Zhou Yu prostrated again and said, "I shall do my utmost, to the day I die!"

Momentarily, Sun Quan entered, and Zhou Yu bowed.

"I hope you will not forget my brother's final instructions," Sun Quan said.

"I would have my innards and brain strewn across the ground to repay his benevolence!" Zhou Yu said he touched his head on the floor.

"Now that I have inherited this territory from my father and brother, how shall I preserve it?" Sun Quan asked.

"Since ancient times, he who finds able men shall prosper, while he who does not shall perish," Zhou Yu said. "You should seek out men of knowledge and vision to aid you; only then will the Southlands be secure."

"My brother said before he died that I should consult Zhang Zhao about internal problems and consult you about external problems," Sun Quan said.

"Zhang Zhao is a worthy and accomplished scholar and well-qualified for the task," Zhou Yu said. "However, I am untalented, and I fear that I cannot carry such a burden. I would like to recommend a man to advise you.

"His name is Lu (3) Su (4). He is a treasure trove of strategies and a storehouse of machinations. His father died when he was young, and he has served his mother piously. His family is very wealthy, and he often spreads his wealth around to help the poor and needy. When I was a precinct leader in Juchao (1,2), I was leading several hundred men through Lu Su's hometown when we ran out of food. We heard that Lu Su had two granaries, each holding 3,000 bushels of grain, so we went to ask him for

help. Such was his generosity that he pointed at one of the granaries and gave everything within to us. He also has a keen interest in swordsmanship, riding, and archery. He currently lives in Qu (1) A (3), but he has returned to Dongcheng (1,2) to attend his grandmother's funeral. His friend Liu (2) Ziyang (3,2) has asked him to go together to join Zheng (4) Bao (3), but Lu Su has not made up his mind yet. Your lordship should summon him immediately."

Sun Quan was delighted at this recommendation and immediately dispatched Zhou Yu to go invite Lu Su. When Zhou Yu saw Lu Su, he relayed Sun Quan's intent to invite Lu Su into his service.

"Recently, Liu (2) Ziyang (3,2) has asked me to go with him to join Zheng (4) Bao (3), and that's what I am planning to do," Lu Su said.

"Remember the words that Ma (3) Yuan (2) said to the founder of the Eastern Han" Zhou Yu said to his friend. "In time like these, not only does the liege choose his official, but the official also chooses his liege. General Sun nurtures men of merit and welcomes scholars. He is a rare find. There's no need to think about any other plans; just come with me to the Southlands. That is the right course."

Zhou Yu's words persuaded Lu Su, and he followed his friend to see Sun Quan. Sun Quan received Lu Su with great respect and held discussions with him that lasted all day. One day, after all the other officials had taken their leave, Sun Quan asked Lu Su to stay and share wine with him. That night, they laid on opposite ends of the same couch. That's a pretty high honor for an official.

In the middle of the night, Sun Quan asked Lu Su, "Right now the house of Han is teetering, and there is unrest everywhere. Now that I have inherited the unfinished task left to me by my father and brother, I wish to emulate the hegemony of old and take the emperor under my protection. What are your thoughts?"

“Back before the founding of the Han dynasty,” Lu Su answered, “the Supreme Ancestor tried to do something similar, but his rival Xiang (4) Yu (3) frustrated all his efforts. Right now, Cao Cao can be compared to Xiang Yu, so how can you, general, emulate the hegemons?”

“I don’t expect the house of Han to survive, and Cao Cao will not be eliminated. Your best course of action is to establish a firm foothold in the Southlands and watch how things evolve in the rest of the realm. Right now, while the North is preoccupied, you should eliminate Huang (2) Zu (3), attack Liu (2) Biao (3), and control the Yangzi (2,3) River in its entirety. Then you should establish your imperial title and turn your sights on the rest of the realm, as the Supreme Ancestor did.”

Sun Quan was so impressed and delighted by this advice that he put his robe back on, stood up, and thanked Lu Su. The next day, he rewarded Lu Su handsomely and also sent fine clothes and other valuable gifts to Lu Su’s mother to show his gratitude.

Lu Su also recommended another man to Sun Quan. This guy was named Zhuge (1,2) Jin (3). Note that his last name is two syllables, Zhuge (1,2), rather than the more common one syllable. He is from Nanyang (2,2). He’s a learned scholar and very filial son. Sun Quan treated him as an honored guest, and Zhuge Jin advised Sun Quan to give Yuan Shao the silent treatment and get on Cao Cao’s good side, and then wait for an opportunity to make his move. Sun Quan agreed, so he sent Yuan Shao’s messenger, Chen (2) Zhen (4), back to Yuan Shao with a letter that declined an alliance.

Meanwhile, in Xuchang, Cao Cao got word that Sun Ce had died, and he thought about invading the Southlands. But Zhang Hong (2), an adviser from the Southlands whom Cao Cao had kept at court for a while, said, “Invading someone while they are in mourning is not an honorable act. If you do not succeed, then you would have turned amity into enmity. Why not take this opportunity to treat the south with kindness instead?”

Cao Cao agreed with this assessment, so he made Sun Quan a general and the governor of Huiji (4,1). He also made Zhang Hong (2) the military commander of Huiji (4,1) and sent him to the Southlands to deliver the seal of office. Sun Quan was delighted with his promotion and happy to get Zhang Hong back, and he asked Zhang Hong to work with Zhang Zhao in administering the Southlands.

Zhang Hong also recommended another man named Gu (4) Yong (1), a disciple of the former renowned court counselor Cai (4) Yong (1). This Gu (4) Yong (1) was a man of few words who abstained from alcohol. He was both severe and forthright. Sun Quan appointed him as a governor's deputy and the acting governor.

With all these capable men joining his service, Sun Quan's prestige spread across the Southlands and he earned the admiration of the people.

Meanwhile, Chen Zhen (4) returned to Yuan Shao and told him, "Sun Ce is dead. Sun Quan has inherited control of the Southlands. Cao Cao has made him a general and they have formed an alliance."

Well, Yuan Shao was not happy about this development at all, so he immediately mobilized the armies of the four provinces under his control, totaling some 700,000 men, and resumed his long-stalled advance on Xuchang.

As this massive army advanced on the strategic crossing of Guandu (1,4), Cao Cao's general Xiahou Dun, who was defending that location, sent an urgent dispatch to the capital. Cao Cao responded by leaving his adviser Xun (2) Yu (4) to oversee things in the capital while he mobilized an army of 70,000 to meet the enemy. That's right, 70,000 against an enemy numbering 700,000. The odds sure looked stacked against Cao Cao.

One of Yuan Shao's former advisers, however, did not think so. Tian (2) Feng (1), whose loyal but unpleasing advice had landed him in Yuan Shao's prison, now wrote a letter to his master, saying,

“The thing to do right now is to wait for the right opportunity. You cannot rashly mobilize a huge army, or things could end badly.”

When this letter reached Yuan Shao, one of his other advisers, Feng (2) Ji (3), who had never gotten along with Tian (2) Feng (1), took the opportunity to badmouth his former rival.

“Your lordship is mobilizing an army in the name of honor,” Feng (2) Ji (3) said to Yuan Shao. “How dare Tian Feng speak such ill words?!”

Yuan Shao was angered by this, and he wanted to execute Tian Feng. His officials talked him out of it, but only for now.

“Once I defeat Cao Cao, I will deal with him!” Yuan Shao said. He then ordered his army to advance. His troops were so numerous that their banners covered the fields on which they marched, and their weapons looked like trees in a forest. This immense force marched to Yangwu (2,3) and set up camp.

Another adviser, Ju (3) Shou (4), said to Yuan Shao, “We may have the numerical advantage, but our troops are not as fierce as Cao Cao’s. Cao Cao’s army may be sharp, but they do not have as much provisions as we do. Since they lack provisions, it’s in their best interest to fight a battle soon. But it’s in our interest to delay. If we can drag this out, the enemy would be defeated without battle.”

Yuan Shao, however, was not having any of this.

“I’m already going to execute Tian Feng upon my return for trying to damage my army’s morale! How dare you follow his lead?!”

So Yuan Shao ordered his men to imprison Ju (3) Shou (4) within the camps, also to be dealt with after he had defeated Cao Cao. He then ordered his army to set up camp, which spanned some 30 miles in all.

Alright, so after much anticipation and delay, Cao Cao and Yuan Shao are about to throw everything they've got at each other. To see how this showdown will turn out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.