

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 42.

Last time, Cao Cao had whipped the three sons of Yuan Shao and taken over all their territory. The eldest, Yuan Tan, was killed in battle. The two younger sons, Yuan Xi and Yuan Shang, had fled to seek refuge with a desert people known as the Wuhuan (1,2). Eager to finish the job, Cao Cao set off after them, but soon found himself in a hostile desert, so hostile that Guo Jia, the adviser who talked him into going into the desert after the Yuans, had fallen ill on the journey.

“This difficult terrain makes me want to turn back,” Cao Cao said to Guo Jia. “What do you think?”

“Speed is of the essence in war,” Guo Jia said. “We are traveling a great distance to attack the enemy. It is not to our advantage to travel with so much heavy equipment and supplies. You are better off with a small force that can reach the Wuhuan (1,2) before they suspect anything. But you must have a guide who is familiar with the area.”

So Cao Cao sent Guo Jia to Yi (4) Province to recuperate and began looking for a guide to lead him through the desert. Someone recommended Tian (2) Chou (2), who used to serve under Yuan Shao. Cao Cao summoned him and asked about the area, and Tian (2) Chou (2) told him, “During the summer and autumn, this area is flooded. It’s too deep for horses and wagons, but too shallow for boats.”

But Tian (2) Chou (2) told Cao Cao about a different crossing point that would lead him out to open land, and he would be able to reach the key city of Liucheng (3,2) before the Wuhuan were onto him. So Cao Cao followed this advice. First, he handed out a generalship to Tian (2) Chou (2) and made him the tour guide to lead the way, followed by the general Zhang Liao, with Cao Cao himself bringing up the rear, taking only a small detachment of cavalry.

When Cao Cao's troops arrived at White Wolf Mountain, they ran into Yuan Xi and Yuan Shang, who were coming to meet them with tens of thousands of Wuhuan (1,2) troops. Zhang Liao quickly sent word to Cao Cao, who went up to high vantage point to size up the enemy. When he saw that the Wuhuan troops were quite disorganized, he instructed Zhang Liao to attack immediately.

So Zhang Liao and three other generals -- Xu Chu, Yu (1) Jin (4), and Xu Huang -- stormed down the mountainside in four detachments and hurled themselves at the enemy. The Wuhuan soldiers quickly fell into disarray, their leader fell to Zhang Liao's saber, and the rest all surrendered. Yuan Xi and Yuan Shang, meanwhile, fled yet again, taking a few thousand riders with them and running off to the region of Liaodong (2,1).

Cao Cao, meanwhile, brought his victorious army into the city of Liucheng (3,2) and appointed his guide, Tian (2) Chou (2), as the marquis of the city. Tian (2) Chou (2), however, wept and said, "I am a disloyal fugitive. You have already shown me great kindness in allowing me to live. How can I dare to receive a reward for selling out this city? I would rather die than to accept this marquiship."

Cao Cao was impressed by yet another demonstration of loyalty from a former servant of Yuan Shao's, so he made Tian (2) Chou (2) a court counselor instead. So, selling out for a marquiship? Not honorable. Selling out for a court counselorship, however, is ok. Anyway, Cao Cao then played nice with the locals to put their minds at ease and rounded up ten thousand of their fine horses before heading home.

On the journey home, the weather was cold and dry, and there were no sources of water within almost a hundred miles. They had to dig really deep into the ground to find water. On top of that, the army was running low on food, so they had to eat some of their horses.

When Cao Cao made it back to Yi (4) Province, he first rewarded everyone who had tried to dissuade him from undertaking his desert war.

“Our campaign was a success, but only because we got lucky,” he told them. “We succeeded with heaven’s blessings, but this victory cannot be taken as an example to be followed. Your advice against the expedition was prudent and deserves to be rewarded. Do not hesitate to speak out again.”

While he was victorious, Cao Cao returned to one piece of heartbreaking news: His adviser Guo Jia, who had stayed behind because of illness, had died days ago. His coffin was temporarily sitting in the main hall. Cao Cao went to mourn him and cried bitter tears.

“Heaven has doomed me by killing Guo Jia!” he wailed. He then turned to his staff and said to them, “You are all about the same age as me, but Guo Jia was the youngest among us, and I wanted to entrust him with affairs after my death. But now he has been taken away in the prime of his life. It tears my innards asunder!”

Guo Jia’s attendants now handed Cao Cao a letter from Guo Jia.

“He wrote it himself before his death,” they told Cao Cao. “He said to us, ‘If the prime minister follows the advice within, then the affairs of Liaodong (2,1) will be taken care of.’ ”

Cao Cao read the letter, nodded, and sighed. No one present understood what he meant, and he did not share either.

The next day, the general Xiahou Dun and a number of others came to see Cao Cao and said, “Gongsun (1,1) Kang (1), the governor of Liaodong, has long disregarded the court. And now Yuan Xi and Yuan Shang have gone to join him. This will surely be a lingering concern. We should mount a preemptive strike to conquer Liaodong (2,1).”

Cao Cao, however, smiled and said, “There is no need to trouble you all. Gongsun Kang (1) will send me the Yuan brothers’ heads in a few days.”

No one really believed Cao Cao, but hey, who were they to argue? So they just waited.

Now, as for Yuan Xi and Yuan Shang, they scurried off to Liaodong with a few thousand riders. When Gongsun Kang heard about their coming, he met with his staff about how to proceed.

“When Yuan Shao was alive, he often had thoughts of seizing Liaodong,” one of his officials, Gongsun Gong (1) said. “Now, Yuan Xi and Yuan Shang have come here after their forces were decimated and they have nowhere else to turn. They are here to steal my territory. If we take them in, they will no doubt move against us in the future. Why not lure them into the city and kill them instead. When we send their heads to Cao Cao, he will reward us handsomely.”

“But what if Cao Cao comes to attack Liaodong?” Gongsun Kang asked. “Would it not be better to keep the Yuan brothers around to help us?”

“Let’s send spies to see if Cao Cao is coming,” Gongsun Gong said. “If he is, then we’ll keep the Yuans around. If not, then we kill them and send their heads to Cao Cao.”

Gongsun Kang agreed and sent out spies.

Meanwhile, when Yuan Xi and Yuan Shang arrived at Liaodong, they discussed amongst themselves: “Liaodong has tens of thousands of troops, enough to stand up to Cao Cao,” they said to each other. “Let’s temporarily seek refuge here. We can kill Gongsun Kang later on and take his land, rebuild and then reclaim Hebei.”

So it was settled, and they went into see Gongsun Kang. But Gongsun Kang sent word that he was under the weather and did not receive them, only putting them up in guest quarters for now. Within a day, Gongsun Kang’s spies reported back that Cao Cao was keeping his troops in Yi (4) Province and had no intention of moving on Liaodong. Delighted, Gongsun Kang set his plan in motion. He first laid down an ambush, hiding armed soldiers behind the walls of his hall. He then summoned the Yuan brothers.

After they greeted each other, he told them to sit. Now, the custom of the time was to sit on cushions or mats on the floor. It was bitter cold, and the Yuan brothers saw that there were no

cushions on the floor, and they wanted to keep their bottoms from freezing, so they asked for cushions.

However, Gongsun Kang glared at them and said, "Your heads are about to go on a long journey. What use have you for cushions?"

Before the two Yuans could react, Gongsun Kang shouted for his men, and they stormed out and killed the brothers on the spot and cut off their heads. And so ended the death throes of the Yuan clan. Gongsun Kang put the heads in nice gift boxes and dispatched a courier to take them to Cao Cao.

At this moment, Cao Cao was still holding his troops in Yi (4) Province, and his officers were getting antsy. Xiahou Dun and Zhang Liao went to see him and said, "If we are not going to attack Liaodong, then we should return to Xuchang before Liu Biao gets any ideas."

"When the Yuan brothers' heads arrive, I will leave immediately," Cao Cao told them.

Well, everyone was kind of skeptical and snickering at this under their breaths. But just then came word that Gongsun Kang had sent along the heads of Yuan Xi and Yuan Shang. Everyone was stunned. When the courier offered up Gongsun Kang's letter, Cao Cao laughed and said, "It is just as Guo Jia had predicted." He then tipped the courier and appointed Gongsun Kang to the rank of a marquis and General of the Left.

Everyone now asked Cao Cao what he meant by his remark, and Cao Cao showed them Guo Jia's letter, which said:

"I have heard that Yuan Xi and Yuan Shang have fled to Liaodong. Your excellency must not send troops there. Gongsun Kang has long feared that the Yuans would try to gobble him up, and he will be suspicious of the Yuan brothers' going to seek refuge with him. If you attack him, then he would join with them to resist you, and you will not be able to settle this quickly. If you give them breathing room, then they will inevitably turn on each other."

So that was a pretty good piece of prognostication by Guo Jia, and all the officers who read the letter voiced their admiration. Cao Cao now led all the officials to Guo Jia's altar to pay their respects again. Cao Cao then led his army back to Ji Province and sent Guo Jia's coffin on ahead to Xuchang to be buried, because, even in winter in the frigid north, those remains were probably a little less than fresh by now. Guo Jia was only 38 when he died, and had rendered outstanding service in the 11 years that he followed Cao Cao on his campaigns, so outstanding, in fact, that he gets a poem to go out on:

Guo Jia, born with gifts divine,
Excelled the heroes of Cao Cao's court.
His heart filled with erudition,
His mind deploying shield and sword.
Like Fan (2) Li (2) of old, he worked his schemes.
Like Chen Ping, he shaped and planned.
Alas, he died before his time.
A broken pillar of the land.

Cao Cao's advisers now came to see him and said, "Now that the north is settled, we should return to Xuchang and begin planning our conquest of the Southlands."

"That has long been my intent as well," Cao Cao said with a smile.

That night, Cao Cao stood on the southeast tower of the city and studied the heavens with the adviser Xun You by his side. Cao Cao pointed skyward and said, "It seems that the aura of the South is glowing. I fear we may not yet be ready to conquer that region."

"With your excellency's heavenly prowess, who would not readily submit?" Xun You said, picking up the bootlicking role that left vacant when Guo Jia died.

Just then, they saw a beam of golden light rising from the ground.

“There must be a treasure buried there,” Xun You said.

So Cao Cao ordered his men to go digging where that light originated, and they unearthed a bronze bird.

“What omen is this” Cao Cao asked Xun You.

“In ancient times, the sage ruler Shun (4) was born after his mother dreamed that a jade bird had entered her body,” Xun You said. “So this must be an auspicious sign.”

Cao Cao was delighted by this, so he ordered a tower to be built to celebrate the occasion. Construction began immediately on what was dubbed Bronze Bird Tower, which would overlook the Zhang (1) River when it's completed in about a year.

One of Cao Cao's sons, Cao Zhi (2), now came to see him and said, “If you are to construct a tower, you must build three of them. The middle one should be the tallest and should be named Bronze Bird. The one on the left should be named Jade Dragon, and the one on the right should be named Golden Phoenix. You should also build two sky bridges connecting them. That would be an impressive sight.”

“Great idea, my son,” Cao Cao said. “When this is completed, it will make my old age more pleasurable.”

So a quick aside here about Cao Zhi (2). Of Cao Cao's five sons, he alone was keen, quick-witted, and adept at composition, and that made him his father's favorite. So now, Cao Cao left him and his eldest brother Cao Pi (1), whom we met in the last episode, in the city to oversee construction of the towers. He also left the newly surrendered general Zhang Ye (4) to defend the northern camp. Cao Cao then set off for Xuchang, with his ranks bolstered by the more than 500,000 troops that had surrendered to him in his campaign against Yuan Shao and his sons.

When he arrived in Xuchang, Cao Cao handed out performance bonuses, recommended a posthumous marquiship for Guo Jia, and took Guo Jia's son into his own home. He then gathered his strategists to start talking about the invasion of the South. His top adviser Xun Yu (4), however, said, "The army has just returned from the northern campaign and should not move again so soon. Let's wait a half year to recover our strength and nourish our mettle. Then we can conquer Liu Biao and Sun Quan in one fell swoop."

Cao Cao agreed with this suggestion. So he assigned the soldiers to settle and reclaim wasteland until the next time they are needed.

So, this is a good time to pause and take stock of where we are. We are now in about the year 208, a good seven or eight years after Cao Cao routed Yuan Shao in their showdown at Guandu. In those seven-plus years, Cao Cao has reunified the northern part of the empire under his control. I have a new post on the website that contains an updated map of who's controlling which territories. The last time I posted a version of this map this was back around episode 24, and you will notice that the landscape looks quite different now. Whereas back in episode 24, we had a bunch of contenders in the north, such as Lü Bu, Yuan Shu, and Yuan Shao, they have now all fallen to Cao Cao, and he has emerged as the 800-pound gorilla in our story. Remember: When his war against Yuan Shao started, he was outnumbered 10-to-1. Now, he's the one with the enormous army, thanks in part to absorbing much of the forces that once belonged to Yuan Shao. The north and much of the central part of the empire now belonged to Cao Cao

To the south, we have two major factions remaining. You've got Liu Biao in Jing (1) Province, who, as we have already established a number of times, seemed to have no ambition beyond staying safe and warm within his own borders. Next to him, we've got the Southlands, which right now was settling in under the leadership of a young CEO in Sun Quan, who took over after his brother Sun Ce

died. And now, Cao Cao is planning to drop the hammer on both of these factions with his newly supersized army. Oh yeah, and Liu Bei is just kind of hanging out in Jing Province, not really doing a whole lot.

So now, our narrative is going to shift south to Jing Province, but we are going to back up about a year. While Cao Cao was still engaged in mop-up duty against Yuan Shao's sons, Liu Bei was just whiling away his days in Jing Province, though he was well-treated by his host Liu Biao, the imperial protector of the province and a fellow kinsman in the imperial clan. One day, while they were catching up over wine, Liu Biao received word that two of his officers who were former rebels that surrendered to him had returned to their old ways and were causing havoc on the civilians in the key city of Jiangxia (1,4).

"If those two have gone rogue again, it means trouble," Liu Biao said.

"Brother, there is no need to worry," Liu Bei said. "I would like to go pacify them."

Liu Biao was delighted by this and gave Liu Bei 30,000 troops, and Liu Bei set off right away. He arrived at Jiangxia (1,4) within a day, and the two rebel leaders came out to face him. As Liu Bei rode out to his main banner, flanked by Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Zhao Yun, he noticed that one of the rebel leaders was riding a particularly fine-looking horse.

"That must be a thoroughbred," Liu Bei said.

Before he had finished speaking, Zhao Yun had already galloped out with spear in hand, charging toward the enemy lines. The rebel leader with the fine horse came to meet him, but was stabbed off his horse within three bouts. Zhao Yun reached out and grabbed the reins of his horse and led it back toward his own lines.

The other rebel leader saw this and rode after him in an attempt to take back the horse. But Zhang Fei let out a loud roar and darted out. With one stab of his spear, this other rebel leader lay dead as well. The rest of the rebels scattered and soon surrendered.

With this easy victory secured, Liu Bei returned to see Liu Biao, who came out of the city to greet him and welcomed him with a celebratory feast. Midway through the feast, Liu Biao said to Liu Bei, "My brother, you are such a hero. With you around, Jing Province is safe. But we still have southern barbarians who often raid our territory, not to mention the threats presented by Zhang (1) Lu (3) and Sun Quan."

To this, Liu Bei answered, "I have three generals who are up to this task. Let Zhang Fei patrol the border to the south; station Guan Yu at the city of Guzi (4,3) to repel Zhang Lu (3); and have Zhao Yun hold the three rivers to keep Sun Quan at bay. That will take care of your concerns."

Liu Biao was delighted and agreed to this suggestion. But somebody else was not so enthusiastic about this, and that somebody was Cai (4) Mao (4), one of Liu Biao's top officers as well as his brother-in-law. When he learned of Liu Bei's proposal, Cai Mao went to speak to Lady Cai (4), his sister and Liu Biao's wife.

"Liu Bei is stationing his three generals on the outside while he remains in the provincial capital; this will be troublesome eventually," Cai Mao said.

So that night, Lady Cai said to Liu Biao: "I have heard that the locals have had frequent interactions with Liu Bei. We must be guard against him. No good can come of allowing him to stay in the city. Why not send him elsewhere?"

"No, Liu Bei is an honorable gentleman," Liu Biao replied.

"He may not be as honorable as you think," his wife pressed.

To this, Liu Biao made no answer.

The next morning, Liu Biao was outside the city when he spotted Liu Bei riding on the fine horse that he had captured from the pacified rebel leaders. Liu Biao asked about the horse's origin and could not stop praising it. Liu Bei took the hint and immediately offered the horse to Liu Biao as a gift, which made Liu Biao very happy.

When Liu Biao went back into the city on his new ride, however, his adviser Kuai (3) Yue (4) asked where the horse came from. Liu Biao told him it was a present from Liu Bei.

"My late brother Kuai (3) Liang (2) was a skilled judge of horses," Kuai (3) Yue (4) said. "I know a thing or two as well. This horse has tear grooves under its eyes and a white spot on its forehead. It's called a hexmark. It will bring doom to its rider. The rebel who rode it died because of it. My lord, you should not ride it."

Upon this advice, Liu Biao invited Liu Bei to a banquet the next day and said to him, "I am deeply grateful for your gift of the fine horse yesterday. However, you often go on military campaigns. This horse is of more use to you. So I am returning it to you."

After Liu Bei thanked him, Liu Biao continued, "My brother, if you stay here too long, your military skills will become rusty. Within the district of Xiangyang (1,2), there is a county called Xinye (1,3), which has a supply of money and provisions. What do you think about garrisoning your troops there?"

Liu Bei accepted this assignment and set out for Xinye (1,3) the next day. As soon as he rode out of the city gates, however, he saw a man bow in front of him and say, "Sir, you must not ride this horse."

This man was Yi (1) Ji (2), one of Liu Biao's advisers. Liu Bei quickly dismounted and asked him the reason for his warning.

"Yesterday, I heard Kuai (3) Yue (4) say to my lord that this horse was called hexmark and will bring doom to its owner. That is why it was returned to you. How can you ride it again?"

“Sir, I am grateful for your concern,” Liu Bei said. “But fate controls the life and death of mortals; a horse cannot intervene.”

Yi (1) Ji (2) was impressed with Liu Bei’s answer, so from that point on, he and Liu Bei became familiar acquaintances.

Things went well for Liu Bei in Xinye (1,3). The army and civilians got along well, and the county was well governed. In the spring of the year 207, one of his wives, Lady Gan (1), gave birth to a son, whom they named Liu Chan (2). The night that she was in labor, a white crane landed on the roof of their residence, squawked 40-some times, and then flew off toward the west. This was a very auspicious sign since white cranes are considered good luck symbols. When the baby was delivered, an unusual fragrance filled the room, another auspicious omen. What’s more, before Lady Gan (1) became pregnant, she had often dreamed that she had swallowed the stars of the Big Dipper, so the baby also got the infant name of A (1) Dou (3), or Dipper, which, yeah, that poor kid would get mocked relentlessly in the schoolyard for that name.

On the political front, at this particular time, Cao Cao was waging war in the north, trying to stamp out the last gasp of Yuan Shao’s sons. Liu Bei went to see Liu Biao and said, “Right now Cao Cao is on a northern campaign. The capital Xuchang is vulnerable. If we mobilize Jing Province’s troops and attack now, victory would be ours.”

Liu Biao, however, did not share such grand visions. “I am content with controlling the nine districts that I have. Why should I go after more?”

Liu Bei fell silent upon hearing this. Liu Biao then invited him to his private quarters for wine. After they had been drinking for a while, Liu Biao suddenly let out a long sigh, which prompted Liu Bei to ask why.

“I have something weighing on my mind, and it’s hard to talk about,” Liu Biao said.

Liu Bei was just about to follow this click bait for more detail, but just then Lady Cai walked out and stood behind a screen, and Liu Biao lowered his head and said nothing more. The banquet ended soon thereafter, and Liu Bei returned to Xinye (1,3).

That winter, Liu Bei got word that Cao Cao had returned victorious from the north, and all Liu Bei could do was lament the fact that Liu Biao did not take his advice and attack when they had the chance.

One day, a messenger from Liu Biao arrived in Xinye with an invitation for Liu Bei to go to Jing Province for a get-together. Liu Bei went, and Liu Biao greeted him and invited him into his private quarters for a banquet.

“I recently heard that Cao Cao has returned to Xuchang and that his strength grows by the day,” Liu Biao said. “He must have designs on Jing Province. I deeply regret not taking your advice and missing a golden opportunity.”

“The realm has been shattered and strife springs up all the time; there is no shortage of opportunities,” Liu Bei said. “If we can capitalize on a future opportunity, then there is no need to regret missing this one.”

“You are quite right, my brother,” Liu Biao said. And they continued to drink. After a little while, Liu Biao suddenly started to shed tears, and Liu Bei asked why.

“There is something on my mind,” Liu Biao said. “I wanted to discuss it with you before, but did not have the chance.”

“Brother, what is troubling you?” Liu Bei asked. “If there is anything I can do, I will not decline, even if it means risking my life.”

“My previous wife bore me a son, Liu Qi (2),” Liu Biao said. “He is kind-hearted, but is timid and not fit to shoulder big burdens. My current wife, Lady Cai, bore me my younger son, Liu Qiong (2). He

is very clever. I am thinking of elevating my younger son as my heir, but am worried about going against tradition. If I make my elder son the heir, it would sow discontent among my wife's clan, and they control my troops, which means trouble down the line. Therefore, I have been unable to make up my mind."

So we have just witnessed how a succession crisis helped bring down Yuan Shao's family, and we are now seeing the same script starting to play itself out again down south. And of course, Liu Bei stepped right into this minefield.

"Ever since antiquity, elevating the young over the elder has led to chaos," he said to Liu Biao. "If you are worried about the power of the Cai clan, you can gradually chip away at it, but you must not make the younger son the heir just based on your affection for him."

To this, Liu Biao said nothing. Unbeknownst to him and Liu Bei, however, they were not alone. As it turns out, Lady Cai, being suspicious of Liu Bei, always make it point to eavesdrop on him and Liu Biao. She was doing that at this very moment from behind a screen. When she heard what Liu Bei said, she was understandably upset.

But Liu Bei was not quite done putting his foot in his mouth yet during this dinner party. To see what other faux pas he's going to commit, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.