

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 53.

Last time, Sun Quan's adviser Lu Su had brought Zhuge Liang to the Southlands to meet with his master in hopes of forming an alliance between Liu Bei and the Southlands to resist Cao Cao. But when Lu Su went to see Sun Quan, he found the other advisers all telling Sun Quan that Cao Cao was too strong and that it was in everyone's best interest to surrender. Sun Quan was nonplussed by this, and while he was taking a bathroom break, Lu Su told him that while everyone else could surrender to Cao Cao, Sun Quan alone could not.

"For the likes of me," Lu Su said, "surrender means being sent back to my hometown. Eventually, I can work my way back into high office. But if you surrender, you would not be able to go home. Your rank would be no more than a marquis. You would have but one carriage, one horse, and a few servants. You would be no one's lord. Everyone else was just trying to save themselves. You must not listen to them. It's time to make a master plan for yourself."

Now, Lu Su's analysis is pretty spot on if you think about it. Look at what happened when Cao Cao took over Jing Province. All the officials and officers who surrendered made out pretty well with nice ranks and titles. But their former lord, Liu Cong (2), met an ignoble end. Sun Quan himself had just been pressed by his own advisers to surrender, and those advisers were no doubt looking out for themselves. Lu Su, however, showed his loyalty in placing Sun Quan's interests above his own.

"Everyone else's words disappointed me greatly," Sun Quan said. "But your sage counsel match my thoughts exactly. Truly it was heaven that sent you to me! But Cao Cao has recently absorbed Yuan Shao's forces and has newly been bolstered by the troops of Jing Province. I do worry that he is too powerful for us to fight."

"I brought Zhuge Jin's (3) younger brother Zhuge Liang back from Jiangxia with me. Your lordship can ask him for the truth about Cao Cao's forces," Lu Su said.

“Master Sleeping Dragon is here?”

“He is resting at the guest house right now.”

“It’s getting late, so let’s not meet today,” Sun Quan said. “Tomorrow, assemble all the civil officials and military officers in the great hall. We can give him a glimpse of our talent before we talk business.”

So the next day, Lu Su went to the guest house to fetch Zhuge Liang and once again reminded him to not tell Sun Quan about how immense Cao Cao’s army really was.

“I will proceed as the situation dictates; I will not slip up,” Zhuge Liang said with a smile.

When they arrived at Sun Quan’s headquarters, they were greeted by 20-some of Sun Quan’s top civil officials and military officers, all dressed to impress. After greeting each and every one of them and asking for their names, Zhuge Liang took his seat as the guest of honor.

Judging by Zhuge Liang’s air of self-assurance and the dignified, confident way in which he carried himself, these officials could guess that he had come to persuade Sun Quan to help Liu Bei. Well, all the civil officials were for surrendering to Cao Cao, so they wanted to knock Zhuge Liang back on his heel a little bit. So how do civilian officials in third-century China do that? Why, with a war of words, of course.

Zhang Zhao (1), Sun Quan’s top civil adviser, launched the opening volley.

“Good sir,” Zhang Zhao said to Zhuge Liang. “I, the least worthy of the Southland’s scholars, have long heard that when you were residing in seclusion, you often compared yourself to the great advisers Guan (3) Zhong (4) and Yue (4) Yi (4). Is this true?”

“Oh, that’s just a casual comparison I make sometimes,” Zhuge Liang replied.

“Recently, I heard that Lord Liu called on you three times and considered himself fortunate to secure your services,” Zhang Zhao continued. “How did he put it? Like fish receiving water? He was planning to roll up Jing (1) Province in the palm of his hand. And yet, the province now belongs to Cao Cao. How do you explain that?”

Zhuge Liang was no dummy. He knew exactly what’s going on here. He also knew that Zhang Zhao, despite his humble brag, was Sun Quan’s top adviser. Zhuge Liang figured that if he could not successfully rebutt Zhang Zhao, he could pretty much forget about persuading Sun Quan. So bring it on!

“In my view, taking Jing Province would have been as easy as turning over my hand," Zhuge Liang replied. "However, my lord is benevolent and honorable and could not bear to take what belongs to his kinsman, so he steadfastly refused. That weakling Liu (2) Cong (2) foolishly listened to bad advice and surrendered behind our backs, giving Cao Cao a free hand in the region. Right now, my lord is amassing his troops at Jiangxia (1,4). His grand plans are not something that common folks would understand.”

Ooh, so, take that, Zhang Zhao. But Zhang Zhao thought he had cornered Zhuge Liang.

“In that case, your actions have contradicted your words,” he told Zhuge Liang. “You compare yourself to Guan Zhong and Yue Yi. But Guan Zhong helped his master dominate the feudal lords, while Yue Yi helped a weak kingdom seize 70-some cities from a powerful rival. Those two men had the talent to oversee empires.

“But you, sir, merely sat in your thatched hut, meditating with your hands around your knees and delighting yourself with the wind and the moon. Since you are now serving Lord Liu, you should help him eliminate rebels and protect the people. Before he met you, Lord Liu was a force to be reckoned with and was able to sack towns and claim territories. So when he received your services, everyone

looked upon him with high hopes. Even little kids were saying that the tiger had grown wings and that the House of Han would soon be reinvigorated and Cao Cao would be exterminated. Everyone, from veteran officials at court to reclusive scholars in the the mountains, were rubbing their eyes in anticipation, expecting the sky to clear and the sun and the moon to shine again. They hoped to see the salvation of the people and the deliverance of the empire in their time.

“However, after you began serving Lord Liu, as soon as Cao Cao’s army arrived, he turned tail and ran. He could neither repay Liu Biao’s kindness and protect the civilians, nor help Liu Biao’s son defend his territory. He abandoned Xinye, ran from Fancheng, lost at Dangyang (1,2), and fled to Xiakou (4,3). Nowhere was he able to find a place to call home. It looks like he’s worse off now than before he got you. How does this measure up to Guan Zhong and Yue Yi? Please forgive my blunt and clumsy words.”

When Zhang Zhao finished delivering this verbal jab, Zhuge Liang laughed out loud and said, "The great roc soars for thousands of miles, so how can common birds comprehend its ambitions?" The great roc, by the way, is a mythical giant bird of prey.

"This is like treating someone who’s gravely ill," Zhuge Liang continued. "First you must give him weak gruel and mild tonics until his internal state is readjusted and balanced and his condition gradually stabilizes. Only then can you give him meat and medicine to cure him and eliminate the root of the disease. If you do not wait until his breath and pulse are calm and steady, and instead administer powerful drugs too soon, it would be difficult to save his life.

“When my lord sought refuge with Liu Biao after his defeat in Runan (3,2), he had fewer than a thousand soldiers and no officers aside from Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Zhao Yun. This is like the peak of an illness. Xinye is a small county in the hills, with few people and little food. My lord was just using it as a temporary foothold. No real general would seriously try to set his base there. Yet, despite poor

weapons, weak walls, inexperienced troops, and insufficient provisions, we made the likes of Xiahou Dun and Cao Ren tremble with fear with a fire at Bowang (2,4) and the water of the White River. Even Guan Zhong and Yue Yi would be hard-pressed to beat that.

“As for Liu Cong’s surrendering to Cao Cao, that happened without my lord’s knowledge. Yet, my lord could not bear to take advantage of the chaos to seize his kinsman’s land. This is a sign of his great compassion and honor. When he was defeated at Dangyang (1,2), he had hundreds of thousands of civilians with him. He could not bear to abandon them and thus traveled only a few miles a day. Instead of trying to lay siege on Jiangling (1,2), he instead chose to go down with the civilians. That is also an illustration of his compassion and honor. In war, it is not uncommon to lose to a numerically superior foe. Even the Supreme Ancestor lost time and again to his rival Xiang (4) Yu (3), but then he achieved success with one battle. Was that not thanks to the sage advice of his strategist Han (2) Xin (4)? The same Han (2) Xin (4) who, in his long service to the Supreme Ancestor, did not compile an impressive record of victories. Yet, when the stakes were at their highest, he was the master planner, unlike posers who impress with their empty reputations and are unrivaled in rhetoric, yet can offer no ideas in the face of a crisis. Such imposters are a farce to amuse the whole world.”

Zhang Zhao was left speechless, unable to come up with a reply. But this war of words was just getting started. Another man now rose to the challenge.

“Right now, prime minister Cao has an army of a million and over a thousand officers. He has set his sights on swallowing up Jiangxia. What will you do, sir?”

Zhuge Liang looked and saw that this was Yu (2) Fan (1), another of the Southland’s veteran civil officials.

“Cao Cao has indeed brought the swarm of locusts that once belonged to Yuan Shao and stolen Liu Biao’s rag-tag troops. Even a million of such soldiers are nothing to be afraid of,” Zhuge Liang replied.

But Yu (2) Fan (1) scoffed and said, “You were defeated at Dangyang (1,2) and have been pushed to Xiakou (4,3), where you can do nothing but ask others for help. And yet you dare to say there is nothing to be afraid of? What a bald-faced lie!”

“How can my lord and his few thousand honorable soldiers stand up to a vicious enemy of a million?” Zhuge Liang answered. “My lord is guarding Xiakou (4,3) and biding his time. Yet, right now the Southlands have crack troops and ample provisions, not to mention the natural defense of the Yangzi (2,3) River. Yet you would have your master kneel to the traitor, even if it means he would be a laughingstock throughout the realm. From the looks of things, my lord is not the one who fears Cao Cao.”

That reply silenced Yu (2) Fan (1), but another official now took his best shot.

“Zhuge Liang, are you not trying to follow the leads of the orators Su (1) Qin (2) and Zhang (1) Yi (2) and convince the Southlands to serve your needs?”

This latest challenger was named Bu (4) Zhi (4), and a quick explanation of the cultural reference he just made is in order here. Su (1) Qin (2) and Zhang (1) Yi (2) were both historical figures from the Warring States Period. During that time, there were many men with great oratory skills who would convince one kingdom or another to send them as diplomats to either convince another kingdom into becoming an ally or to persuade a rival that it’s not in its best interest to encroach. Su (1) Qin (2) and Zhang (1) Yi (2) were two of the best at this line of work. Although some of these men had true skills and knowledge, they were often viewed with a degree of scorn and disrespect, because people think

all these guys do is wag their tongues. I would say they were kind of viewed as traveling salesmen. So Bu (4) Zhi (4) was painting Zhuge Liang in a less-than-flattering light with his comparison.

Undaunted, Zhuge Liang said to Bu (4) Zhi (4), “You only think of Su (1) Qin (2) and Zhang (1) Yi (2) as orators, but did you forget about their distinguished accomplishments? Su Qin served as prime minister in six different kingdoms, while Zhang Yi twice served as the prime minister for the kingdom of Qin (2). They both gave counsel that enlightened and strengthened their lords. You can hardly put them in the same league as those who cringe before the mighty, prey upon the weak, and cower before the sword. You gentlemen were frightened into advocating surrender as soon as you heard Cao Cao’s empty threats. Where do you get off making fun of Su Qin and Zhang Yi?”

Ok, so that’s three challengers destroyed. Who’s next?

“What is your opinion of Cao Cao?” an official named Xue (1) Zong (1) suddenly asked.

“He is a traitor of the Han. What more needs to be said?” Zhuge Liang replied.

“You are mistaken, sir,” Xue (1) Zong (1) countered. “The Han has exhausted its mandate from heaven. Right now, Prime Minister Cao controls two-thirds of the empire, and everyone pledges their allegiance to him. Yet Lord Liu refuses to recognize heaven’s will and insists on fighting him. This is like throwing an egg against a rock. How can your master not lose?”

At this, Zhuge Liang raised his voice and answered angrily, “Xue (1) Zong (1), how can you speak such dishonorable words?! A true man ought to make loyalty and filial piety his foundation. You, sir, are a servant of the Han. If you see someone who exhibits disloyalty, you should pledge to help exterminate them. That is expected of an official. Right now, instead of repaying the court’s benevolence toward his forefathers, Cao Cao is harboring thoughts of usurpation. Men throughout the empire despise him, yet you declare that he has received the mandate of heaven. You deny both your liege and your father, and you are unfit to speak in the company of men!”

This admonishment had the intended effect, and Xue (1) Zong (1) was filled with shame and could make no answer. But yet another man took his spot immediately.

“Cao Cao may be holding the emperor hostage and controlling the regional lords through him, but he is at least a descendant of the Supreme Ancestor’s prime minister. Lord Liu, on the other hand, may claim to be a descendant of a prince, but that has never been verified. From what people can see, he is nothing more than a mat weaver and sandal maker, hardly a worthy rival for Cao Cao.”

This guy’s name was Lu (4) Ji (1), and there’s a story about him. When he was a kid, he attended a banquet held by Yuan Shu (4). During the banquet, he stashed a tangerine into his shirt pocket. When Yuan Shu spotted this and asked him why he was, umm, trying to abscond with fruit, Lu (4) Ji (1) replied that he was, uhhh, taking the tangerine home for his mom. This story has stuck with him even as he has grown up, and Zhuge Liang was not about to let him forget it now.

“Are you not the Lu (4) Ji (1) who stashed the tangerine at Yuan Shu’s banquet?” Zhuge Liang said with a smile. “Please sit and hear me. Indeed Cao Cao is the descendant of a prime minister, and his family has been officials of the Han for generations. So for him to monopolize power and wield it recklessly, deceiving and abusing the emperor, is more than just negation of his master. It’s nullification of his own sacred ancestor. This makes Cao Cao more than just a seditious subject; it makes him a traitorous son. Lord Liu, meanwhile, is a dignified scion of the imperial house. The emperor recognized his lineage with the official imperial genealogy. So how can you say there is no verification? Besides, the Supreme Ancestor started out as a mere precinct magistrate but ended up ruler of the empire. So what shame is there in being a mat weaver or sandal maker? Your puerile point of view makes you unworthy to take part in a discussion among distinguished scholars.”

Oooh, another burn. And Lu (4) Ji (1), like everyone before him, had no response. But someone else just could not let this matter drop and declared, “Zhuge Liang’s rhetoric is bereft of reason. Such distorted judgments are not worthy of consideration. I would like to ask you, sir, which classics have you mastered?”

So you know what? At this point, I’m not even going to bother mentioning this guy’s name, because he should just be known as burn victim No. 6.

“Quoting from books is the work of text-bound pedants,” Zhuge Liang replied. “How can such people revive our nation or further our cause? Consider the great sages since antiquity, the likes of Yi (1) Yin (3), who tilled the soil, or Jiang (1) Ziya (3,2), who fished the river? Or the likes of Zhang (1) Liang (2). These worthy men aided their lords in times of peril. What canons did they master? Do you really think they spent their days confined between the pen and the inkstone like bookworms who argue over texts, sling words, and wield brushes?”

In other words, where are your practical skills? To this, burn victim No. 6 had no answer and could only hang his head and brood in silence. But would you believe that someone was eager to be burn victim No. 7?

“Sir, you talk a good game, but do you have any real learning? I’m not so sure that you won’t end up as the butt of scholars’ ridicule,” this guy said.

“There are noble scholars and there are petty scholars,” Zhuge Liang said. “The noble scholar is loyal to his master and loves his country. He defends what is right and shuns what is wicked. He is intent on making his influence felt during his times and making his name known through the ages. The petty scholar bends his efforts to polishing rhymes, knows no skill except that of trivial composition. He authors grandiose odes in his youth and by his old age he has digested the classics. In one sitting, a thousand words may flow from his pen, but among them not a single useful idea can be found. For

instance, the scholar Yang (2) Xiong (2) was well-known for his literary work, but he subjugated himself to the service of the usurper Wang (2) Mang (3). In the end, he leaped to his death from atop a building. He is an example of the petty scholar. Though he may produce a 10,000-word rhapsody every day, what value does it have?"

Watching Zhuge Liang mow down seven successive challengers without breaking a sweat was enough to stun everyone in attendance, but it was still not enough to make them stop, as two more guys were just about to throw down another verbal gauntlet. But just then, a man stomped in from outside and said sternly, "Zhuge Liang is a rare talent, yet you gentlemen have been trying to stump him by wagging your tongues. Such is not the way to treat honored guests. Cao Cao's army is bearing down on our borders, yet instead of trying to come up with a way to repel the enemy, you are here jousting with words!"

This man was Huang (2) Gai (4), one of the old generals who had been with the Sun family from the very beginning, and he was currently in charge of provisions for the army of the Southlands.

"Sir, sometimes silence wins the day," Huang Gai said to Zhuge Liang. "Why not save your valuable advice for my lord instead of trading barbs with these people?"

"These gentlemen are unaware of the demands of our times," Zhuge Liang replied, "so their objections had to be answered."

With that, Huang Gai and Lu Su put a merciful end to this lopsided debate and escorted Zhuge Liang to go see Sun Quan. But before we move on, I want to point out that this little spat between scholars is one of my favorite scenes from the novel. I often imagine this is what academic conferences are like, and who among us would not dream of boldly striding into a room filled with stereotypically haughty academics, destroying their pedantic arguments, leaving them speechless, telling them that their puerile perspectives are unworthy of a seat at the table with distinguished

scholars, and capping it all off with, "I hate to run, but I have to go advise the president on his defense policy"?

So, catching up with Zhuge Liang and company: As they were heading in to see Sun Quan, they ran into Zhuge Liang's older brother, Zhuge Jin (3). After greeting each other, Zhuge Jin said, "Brother, why have you not come to see me since you've arrived in the Southlands?"

"I am here on behalf of Lord Liu, so I must put official business before personal affairs," Zhuge Liang answered. "Before my official duties are completed, I dare not tend to personal business. Please forgive me."

"After you meet with my lord, come talk with me," Zhuge Jin told him and then went on his way.

Lu Su now reminded Zhuge Liang once again about not telling Sun Quan how powerful Cao Cao's army really was, and Zhuge Liang nodded. They then went into the main hall, where Sun Quan rose from his seat to welcome Zhuge Liang. After the formalities, Sun Quan offered Zhuge Liang a seat, while the Southland's officials lined up on two sides of the hall while Lu Su stood next to Zhuge Liang.

As Zhuge Liang relayed Liu Bei's greetings, he sneaked a peek at Sun Quan and saw that he had quite an imposing presence, with striking green eyes and a purplish beard.

"This man has an uncommon appearance," Zhuge Liang thought to himself. "I must incite him instead of trying to persuade him. I'll wait till he questions me."

After tea was served, Sun Quan spoke up.

"Lu Su has told me much about your talent," he said to Zhuge Liang. "Since I have the fortune to meet you today, I would like to request your instruction."

"I am untalented and unlearned; I hope I can do justice to your questions."

"You recently helped Lord Liu battle Cao Cao at Xinye, so you must have a good idea of the strength of Cao Cao's army," Sun Quan said.

"Lord Liu had few troops and officers, and Xinye is a small town with no provisions. How could we hold our own against Cao Cao?" Zhuge Liang replied.

"So how many troops does Cao Cao have?" Sun Quan asked.

"With cavalry, infantry, and navy combined, about a million or so," Zhuge Liang said.

"That sounds like an exaggeration."

"Not so. Cao Cao started with 200,000 of his own troops. When he defeated Yuan Shao, he gained another 500 to 600,000. He then recruited another 300 to 400,000 soldiers from the heartland. And now, he has added another 200 to 300,000 troops from Jing Province. By that count, it's no less than one and a half million. I did not want to frighten your officials, so I only said a million."

When Lu Su heard this, he was like, wait, don't you remember what I kept telling you? So he started looking at Zhuge Liang and trying to signal him to x-ray on the million-ay. But Zhuge Liang just acted as though he did not see Lu Su.

"How many officers does Cao Cao have?" Sun Quan asked.

"If we're talking about capable strategists and veteran generals, then at least a couple thousand," Zhuge Liang said.

"Now that Cao Cao has taken Jing Province, does he have greater ambitions?"

"Right now he is camped along the river and preparing war ships. What would he be after if not the Southlands?"

"If he intends to swallow my territory, then can you please help me decide whether to put up a fight?"

"I do have a piece of advice. But I worry you would not heed it."

"I await your insightful counsel."

"Back when the realm was in chaos, you established yourself in the Southlands, while Lord Liu rallied his forces below the River Han (4) to contest with Cao Cao," Zhuge Liang said. "But now Cao

Cao has rid himself of his biggest headaches and has stabilized his position. And he has just recently conquered Jing Province and is feared throughout the realm. Whatever heroes may try to oppose him do not have a base from which to wage war. Hence Lord Liu has fallen back. I implore you, general, to take stock of your own strength and proceed. If your forces are strong enough to stand against the North, then you should cut ties with Cao Cao sooner than later. But if you don't think your forces can stand against Cao Cao, then why not do as your advisers suggest and lay down your arms and submit?"

Before Sun Quan could respond, Zhuge Liang continued. "I know that you have put up an outward appearance of submission but are torn inside about what to do. The situation is precarious. If you do not act decisively, disaster will strike!"

Sun Quan was rather nonplussed about this advice. "Based on what you are telling me, then why doesn't your master surrender to Cao Cao?"

"Just as Tian (2) Heng (2), a stalwart loyalist of the Spring and Autumn kingdom of Qi (2), held fast to honor and refused to disgrace himself, how can Lord Liu, a scion of the imperial house, a hero of the times, who is looked up to by learned men everywhere, do any less? His failures are ordained by heaven and not of his own doing. How can he subjugate himself beneath another?"

When Sun Quan heard this, he did not exactly appreciate what Zhuge Liang was implying about him. His face changed color, and he got up and stomped off into his private quarters in a huff. All the officials laughed at Zhuge Liang and left, and Lu Su now admonished him.

"Sir, why did you say that? It's a good thing my lord is too gracious to admonish you to your face. Your words were too disrespectful toward my lord."

So what's Zhuge Liang going to do now that he has ticked off the leader of the faction he was counting on to save his hide? Find out next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast.

Thanks for listening.

