

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 55.

Before we continue, I want to insert a note here that I haven't been able to find a convenient place in the narrative to slip in. So far, I have been referring to the region occupied by Sun Quan as the Southlands. However, it's about time that I introduce another name for this region -- Dong (1) Wu (2). Dong (1) means East, and Wu (2) is the name of this general region. So the name literally means Eastern Wu. Going forward, you will hear me use both the Southlands and Dong Wu. In some cases, they are used interchangeably, but you should know that the Southlands refers to the geographical region, while Dong Wu refers to the political entity that occupies the region of the Southlands. It's kind of like the difference between the South and the Confederacy during the American Civil War. So just try to keep those two terms and that distinction in mind as we go forward.

Alright, so last time, a few well-placed words from Zhuge Liang ticked off Zhou Yu something fierce and set him squarely against Cao Cao. So the next day Zhou Yu went before Sun Quan, broke down all the reasons why Cao Cao's campaign is doomed, and asked Sun Quan to fight rather than surrender.

Upon hearing Zhou Yu's words, Sun Quan sprang to his feet and declared, "That old traitor has long harbored thoughts of usurpation. The only people he feared were the Yuans, Lü Bu, Liu Biao, and me. Now all the others are dead. I swear I will not share this earth with that old scoundrel!"

He then said to Zhou Yu, "Your words match my thoughts exactly. Heaven must have sent you to me!"

"Your servant is willing to fight to the death for you, general," Zhou Yu said. "But I just worry that you might still harbor hesitations."

When he heard this, Sun Quan pulled out his sword and hacked off a corner of the desk in front of him.

“If anyone dares to mention surrender again, let this be your fate!” he declared. He then presented the sword to Zhou Yu, appointed him as the supreme field commander, with the general Cheng Pu as the vice commander, and Lu Su, Zhou Yu’s trusted friend and colleague, as the senior military adviser.

Zhou accepted the sword, turned to the gathered officials and officers and said, “At his lordship’s command, I am leading us to defeat Cao Cao. Tomorrow, everyone must gather at our headquarters on the river banks to receive their orders. Anyone who delays or interferes will be dealt with according to the laws of the seven prohibitions and 54 capital offenses.”

So these seven prohibitions are broad categories like slowing down the army, stealing from the army, lying to the army, and so forth. Each category contains a number of more specific offenses, totaling 54 in all, and each of them is punishable by death. Just to give you an idea of what would cost you your head, here are a few sample offenses: Failing to advance when you hear the war drums, failing to retreat when you hear the gong, not keeping your weapons in good condition, eavesdropping on military secrets, taking advantage of civilians, complaining too much, and complaining about the commander, and, probably my favorite, looking dour. So turn that frown upside down if you want to keep your head.

So anyway, after giving this order, Zhou Yu took his leave of Sun Quan, while all the other officials and officers left without saying a word. When he returned to his residence, Zhou Yu invited Zhuge Liang over and briefed him on the morning’s events.

“We have decided to fight, so now I am turning to you for your sage advice on how to defeat Cao Cao,” Zhou Yu said.

But Zhuge Liang was like, not so fast.

“General Sun still has his doubts, so we cannot settle on a plan yet,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Zhou Yu asked.

“He is afraid of Cao Cao’s superior numbers. You should break down the enemy’s numerical strength for him. That will erase his doubts. THEN success is guaranteed.”

So Zhou Yu went back to see Sun Quan that night.

“We are mobilizing the army tomorrow,” Zhou Yu said. “Does your lordship still have any doubts?”

“No. Well, none except that I worry Cao Cao has too many troops for us to overcome,” Sun Quan replied.

“I have come specifically to set your mind at ease,” Zhou Yu said with a smile. “Your lordship is harboring doubts because Cao Cao’s letter claimed to have an army of a million, and you don’t know if it’s actually true. But let’s do the math: His original Northern army had roughly 150,000 men, and they are already exhausted. He absorbed only about 80,000 from Yuan Shao’s old troops, and he doesn’t have full faith in their allegiance yet. With such exhausted and untrustworthy soldiers, even though there are a lot of them, there is no need to worry. My army of 50,000 is more than enough to defeat them. I hope your lordship will not worry about this anymore.”

When he heard this, Sun Quan patted Zhou Yu on the back and said, “Your words have erased my doubts. Zhang Zhao has greatly disappointed me with his lack of ideas. Only you and Lu Su are on the same page as me. You, Lu Su, and Cheng Pu may set off with your army right away. I will send backup and provisions to reinforce you. If your vanguard runs into difficulties, return to me at once, and I will personally face off against Cao Cao, with no further doubts in my mind.”

Zhou Yu thanked Sun Quan and took his leave. But something else now began to eat at Zhou Yu.

“Zhuge Liang was able to anticipate my lord’s thoughts,” he thought to himself. “His strategies are also superior to mine. He will no doubt become a problem for the Southlands in due time. I should kill him now.”

So Zhou Yu invited Lu Su to his tent that night to discuss doing away with Zhuge Liang. But Lu Su advised against it.

“If we kill a talented man before we defeat Cao Cao, we would be helping the enemy,” he said.

“But with Zhuge Liang helping Liu Bei, they will surely become a thorn in our side,” Zhou Yu countered.

“Well, Zhuge Liang’s older brother, Zhuge Jin, is serving our lord. Why not have him convince Zhuge Liang to come over to our side? Won’t that be great?” Lu Su suggested.

That convinced Zhou Yu to shoo away his thoughts of killing Zhuge Liang ... for the time being.

The next day at dawn, Zhou Yu went to his camp and held an all-hands-on-deck meeting. To show that this was serious, the meeting was also attended by executioners who were ready to chop off the heads of anyone who was remiss in his duty. But there was one rather conspicuous absence -- the vice commander, Cheng Pu.

So what’s the deal here? Well, Cheng Pu, you have to understand, was one of the four original generals who was right there at the beginning of the Sun family’s rise. And he had a lot of seniority on Zhou Yu. He was slaying enemies on the battlefield while Zhou Yu was still in split-bottom pants. Yet, here he was, being relegated to Zhou Yu’s second-in-command. So it’s understandable that Cheng Pu would feel a little put out. So on the first day of this campaign, he called in sick and sent his son to the meeting instead.

Zhou Yu could have made a big to-do about this in front of everyone, but instead, he just proceeded with the business at hand.

“The law is blind, so you all must tend to your duties,” he told the assembled officials. “Right now, Cao Cao is abusing his power much like Dong Zhuo. He is holding the emperor hostage in Xuchang and is encroaching on our territory with his troops. Our lord has ordered me to bring him to justice. Gentlemen, I am calling on you to give your all in this endeavor. Wherever our troops pass, the civilians must not be disturbed. Rewards and punishments shall follow the strictest standards.”

After his little pep talk, Zhou Yu started handing out orders. First, he appointed the veteran generals Han (2) Dang (1) and Huang (2) Gai (4) to lead the vanguard. They were to set out immediately with the warships under their command and head to the Three Rivers, which refers to the general area where the Han (4) River meets the Yangzi (2,3) River. And for your reference, on the map on our website, the Yangzi River is called the Great River. The vanguard was to set up camp in that area and wait for further orders.

Next, Zhou Yu sent out five more detachments of troops, each led by two generals. I can go down the list here, but it would just be a bunch of names that are not relevant at this point. Suffice it to say, Zhou Yu very much looked the part of supreme commander and showed everyone that he knew his stuff. Once he was done giving orders, everyone snapped to and prepared to set out.

Cheng Pu’s son then reported back to his father and told him how impressive Zhou Yu had been in his deployment of the troops. Cheng Pu said with surprise, “I had always thought Zhou Yu was weak and not fit for command. But judging from his performance today, he’s truly up to the task. How can I not respect him?”

So Cheng Pu immediately went to camp to offer his apologies to Zhou Yu. For his part, Zhou Yu reacted magnanimously, so everything was hunky dory at the top of Dong Wu’s chain of command.

The next day, Zhou Yu invited Zhuge Jin (3) over and said to him, “Your brother Zhuge Liang has the talent to assist a king. Why has he subjugated himself to the service of Liu Bei? Fortunately, he’s in the Southlands right now. Might I trouble you to persuade him to leave Liu Bei and serve Dong Wu instead? Our lord would gain a capable adviser, and you would be able to see your brother all the time. Won’t that be wonderful?”

Zhuce Jin agreed that this would indeed be wonderful and agreed to the errand. So he went to see Zhuge Liang at his guest house right away. Zhuge Liang welcomed in his elder brother, kneeled before him with tears in his eyes to show Zhuge Jin how much he had been missed.

After a little catching up, Zhuge Jin wept and said, “My brother, do you know the story of Bo (2) Yi (2) and Shu (1) Qi (2)?”

Zhuge Liang, of course, knew the story. But I’m guessing a lot of you out there don’t. Bo (2) Yi (2) and Shu (1) Qi (2) were a pair of brothers from the end of the Shang dynasty, so we are talking about 11th century BC here. They were two of the princes of a kingdom that was a vassal of the Shang. Bo (2) Yi (2) was the eldest son, while Shu (1) Qi (2) was the third son. Chinese tradition typically dictated that the eldest son would inherit the throne, but in this case, their father went against tradition and named Shu Qi, the third son, his successor.

If you have been paying any attention at all so far in our novel, you know that this kind of shenanigans usually spells trouble. Heck, Liu Bei even said a few episodes back that elevating the younger son over the elder son has been a recipe for chaos since antiquity. But THIS case from antiquity played out a little differently. Shu Qi, recognizing that his elevation to heir went against tradition, refused to accept the title and decided to leave the kingdom instead so as not to be a potential headache for his eldest brother, Bo Yi.

Ok, so now I guess the title of heir has to go to Bo Yi, right? Wrong. Bo Yi, not wanting to go against his father’s wish, had also decided to leave the kingdom instead of making a bid for the

throne. So Bo Yi and Shu Qi actually ended up leaving together. The title of heir went to another brother, while the two of them went to the kingdom of Zhou (1), where they planned to spend the rest of their days in peace.

But alas, it was not to be. Sometime later, the king of Zhou (1) decided to launch a campaign to topple the flailing house of the Shang (1) Dynasty, the house that had been calling the shots in China for centuries but by now had turned corrupt and despotic. Despite the Shang's shortcomings, however, Bo Yi and Shu Qi still held a deep sense of loyalty toward the Shang. They had been good friends with the father of the King of Zhou, so they now went to see the king and tried to talk him out of starting this war. But the king's mind was made up. The war went on as planned, and the Zhou was successful in overthrowing the Shang and founding their own dynasty, one that would endure for some 800 years.

While the Zhou was celebrating, Bo Yi and Shu Qi were mourning the demise of their former overlord. They were so broken up about it, in fact, that they swore to never eat any food produced by the Zhou. As you might imagine, that was proving to be a little difficult now that the Zhou ruled the land. Bo Yi and Shu Qi also did not help themselves when it came time to picking their new home. They took up refuge in a barren mountain, and soon they were reduced to eating bark and weeds, and soon after that, they starved to death.

So to circle all the way back to before this anecdote started, why was Zhuge Jin (3) referencing this story? Well, Bo Yi and Shu Qi are often praised for their fraternal bond with each other. Soooo, you see where this is going?

Zhuge Liang certainly did, so as soon as his brother asked him if he knew who these two guys were, he quickly replied, "They are worthy sages from antiquity."

“And they were together, even as they starved to death on the mountain,” Zhuge Jin continued. “You and I came from the same womb and suckled on the same breast, and yet we serve different masters and rarely see each other. How can we not be ashamed when we think of the story of Bo Yi and Shu Qi?”

“Brother,” Zhuge Liang said. “what you speak of pertains to the realm of sentiment. What I must preserve is in the realm of honor. You and I are both men of the Han (4), and Imperial Uncle Liu is a member of the House of Han. If you would leave Dong Wu and join me in the service of the imperial uncle, then you would be a true servant of the Han AND we would be reunited. This way, both sentiment and honor would be satisfied. What do you think?”

So before he could even deliver his recruitment pitch, Zhuge Jin found himself being recruited by his brother instead. This preemptive strike left him speechless, and he had no choice but to take his leave.

When Zhuge Jin reported back to Zhou Yu and told him what happened, Zhou Yu asked him, “Sir, do you intend to leave?”

“I have received great kindness from General Sun. How can I leave him?!” Zhuge Jin answered.

“Since you are loyal to our lord, there is no need to say more,” Zhou Yu assured him. “I think I know how to make your brother give in.”

What Zhou Yu did not tell Zhuge Jin was that by “make your brother give in,” what he actually meant was “kill your brother.” We’ll get to that in a little bit, but first things first, Zhou Yu had an army to mobilize. The next day, with the troops ready to roll out, Zhou Yu went to take his leave of Sun Quan.

“Go on ahead, and I will be right behind you with reinforcements,” Sun Quan told him.



So Zhou Yu, accompanied by his second-in-command, Cheng Pu, and his good friend Lu (3) Su (4), set out with the army. He also invited Zhuge Liang to tag along, and Zhuge Liang said sure, why not. So they hopped on a ship and set sail for Xiakou (4,3). They dropped anchor about 20 miles away from the Three Rivers area, where the vanguard was stationed. Zhou Yu set up headquarters in the center of his fleet and ordered a ring of camps to be built along the shore around the western hills. As for Zhuge Liang, he made himself comfortable in a little boat.

After setting out his army's arrangements, Zhou Yu invited Zhuge Liang to come talk business in the main tent.

"When Cao Cao went up against Yuan Shao," Zhou Yu said, "he was at a numerical disadvantage and yet managed to triumph. This was because Cao Cao first cut off Yuan Shao's provisions. Right now, Cao Cao commands an army of 830,000, while we only have about 60,000 men. How can we take him on? We must first cut off his provisions. Only then can we hope to defeat him. My scouts have reported that Cao Cao's provisions are stored at Iron Pile Mountain. Sir, you have lived on the Han (4) River and are familiar with the terrain. Might I trouble you to lead your generals Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Zhao Yun to go to Iron Pile Mountain tonight to cut off Cao Cao's provisions? I will also send a thousand men to help you. This would benefit both of our masters. I hope you will not refuse."

So let's see here: Yesterday you sent my brother to try to talk me into joining your side, and he failed. And today, you are asking me to go to a place called Iron Pile Mountain to cut off the supplies of an enemy who is well known for doing exactly that to his foes. Hmm. I wonder if the two could possibly be connected.

Zhuge Liang, of course, was well aware of what Zhou Yu was up to, but he wasn't about to decline just because it was a trap. Instead, he enthusiastically accepted the assignment, which made Zhou Yu very happy.

After Zhuge Liang left, Lu Su asked Zhou Yu what he meant by sending Zhuge Liang on this seemingly suicidal assignment.

"I want to kill Zhuge Liang, but I'm worried people would laugh at me if I did," Zhou Yu said. "So I'm letting Cao Cao kill him for me to rid us of future troubles."

Lu Su then went to see Zhuge Liang to see if he's aware of what he's walking into. When he found him, he saw that Zhuge Liang showed no sign of concern and was busy getting his troops ready for the mission.

Now, Lu Su was a kind-hearted man. In fact, he was renowned for his kindness and humanity. He could not bear to see Zhuge Liang walk into a trap, so he tried to drop him a hint by striking up a conversation.

"Sir, do you think you will succeed?" Lu Su asked.

"[Laugh] I have mastered the finer points of every form of warfare, be it naval, foot, horse, or chariot," Zhuge Liang said with a laugh. "So why would I worry about my chances? I'm not a one-trick pony like you or Zhou Yu."

Wait wait, what?

"Why do you say that we are one-trick ponies?" Lu Su asked, a little annoyed at this uncalled-for slight.

"I heard a kids' limerick from the Southlands," Zhuge Liang replied. "It goes, 'To ambush a trail or hold a pass, Lu Su's the man to trust. For marine war, Commander Zhou Yu is a must.' From that, it

seems that you are only good for a roadside ambush or defending a pass, while Commander Zhou only knows how to fight on water, not on land.”

Um, well, excuse me for trying to save you from a trap. Lu Su left Zhuge Liang to his business and went back to tell Zhou Yu what he said, and Zhou Yu was incensed.

“How dare he accuse me of being inept at fighting on land?! Fine, I don’t need him to go on this mission! I’ll take 10,000 men and cut off Cao Cao’s supplies myself!”

So Lu Su went back to Zhuge Liang to tell him about the change of plans, but Zhuge Liang laughed once again.

“Commander Zhou sent me to cut off Cao Cao’s provisions so as to use Cao Cao to kill me,” he said to Lu Su. “I just teased him with a few words, and he’s all worked up. Right now, we need every last man. I hope our two sides can be of one mind. Only then can we succeed. If we scheme and plot against each other, all will be lost. That scoundrel Cao Cao is crafty and has made a living out of cutting off other people’s provisions, so how can his own supplies not be under heavy guard? If Commander Zhou goes on this mission, he would surely be captured. The thing to do now is to first win a naval battle to shake the enemy’s morale, and then find a way to crush them. I hope you will explain this to Zhou Yu, diplomatically.”

So Lu Su rushed back to relay Zhuge Liang’s words to Zhou Yu, and Zhou Yu could only shake his head and stamp his foot.

“This man’s knowledge is 10 times mine. If we don’t eliminate him now, he will definitely be trouble for us.”

“But we need talented men right now,” Lu Su said. “I hope you will put the country’s fate first and wait until after we have defeated Cao Cao to make a move on him.”

Lu Su's words swayed Zhou Yu, and he dropped his murderous impulse ... for now. But as we will soon see, he kind of has trouble keeping that impulse in check for very long.

Let's leave Zhou Yu to throw darts at a picture of Zhuge Liang and go check on the other side of this anti-Cao Cao coalition. At this moment, Liu Bei had garrisoned his troops at the key strategic point of Xiakou, while his nephew Liu Qi was holding down Jiangxia, another key location. One day, Liu Bei saw in the distance countless banners and flags and row upon row of spears on the southern shore of the river. He figured this must be the troops of Dong Wu, so he moved the troops at Jiangxia across the Yangzi River and east to a key point called Fankou (2,3). Liu Bei then gathered his staff to discuss their next move.

"We have not heard from Zhuge Liang since he left to go to Dong Wu," Liu Bei said. "I wonder how his mission is going. Who can go find out?"

One of his advisers, Mi (2) Zhu (2), volunteered, and Liu Bei told him to bring a bunch of presents, including wine and goats, and go to the camp of the Dong Wu forces. Officially, he was going there to treat their allies to a feast as token of friendship. Unofficially, of course, he was looking for Zhuge Liang.

So Mi Zhu hopped on a small boat and sailed down river, arriving at Zhou Yu's headquarters. After pleasantries were exchanged, Zhou Yu held a banquet to welcome his visitor. During the banquet, Mi Zhu asked, "Zhuge Liang has been with you for a long time. I would like for him to accompany me back."

"But he is helping me plan how to defeat Cao Cao; I cannot afford to let him leave," Zhou Yu replied. "Moreover, I would like to meet Lord Liu and discuss our plans with him. But alas, as commander of the troops, I cannot leave my post even for a short time. I would be most gratified if he would agree to come here and visit us."

Mi Zhu said ok, I'll tell him that, and then took his leave.

Once he was gone, Lu Su asked Zhou Yu what he was up to.

"Liu Bei is a hero of the land; we cannot allow him to live," Zhou Yu told him. "I want to use this opportunity to lure him here and kill him, so that we will be rid of this future concern."

So see, it did not take long for Zhou Yu's murderous impulses to flare back up again. You don't want me to kill Zhuge Liang? Fine. I'll just kill his master. Lu Su, who was trying his best to preserve the coalition, thought this was a TERRIBLE idea, and he tried time and again to talk Zhou Yu out of it. But Zhou Yu's mind was made up. He sent out secret orders that if Liu Bei showed up, he would be greeted with an ambush of 50 armed soldiers in hiding. When Zhou Yu invariably threw a banquet to welcome Liu Bei, he would find the right moment to throw his cup to the ground, and the armed men would storm out, bum-rush Liu Bei, and cut him to smithereens. Problem solved.

Now, as for Liu Bei, when Mi Zhu relayed Zhou Yu's invitation, he immediately ordered his men to prepare a fast boat so he could go to Zhou Yu's camp. But his brothers advised caution.

"Zhou Yu is a crafty one," Guan Yu said. "Besides, we have not received any word from Zhuge Liang. This might be a trap. You should not go so lightly."

"But I am allying with Dong Wu to defeat Cao Cao," Liu Bei said. "Zhou Yu wants to meet me. Refusal is not the act of an ally. Mutual suspicions would derail our enterprise."

"If you insist on going, I am willing to accompany you," Guan Yu said.

At that, Zhang Fei also wanted to go, but Liu Bei told him and Zhao Yun to stay and defend their camp. Liu Bei and Guan Yu then took an entourage of about 20 people and headed toward Zhou Yu's camp on a small boat.

So how will Zhou Yu's little ambush play out? And how will it affect the coalition when half of the coalition is, you know, dead at the hand of the other half? Find out next time, on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast.